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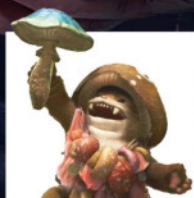
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REBELLION

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"EVERY DECISION YOU MAKE WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON ITS STORY"



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt has a now legendary reputation, with the dark fantasy action-RPG going down in history as one of gaming's greatest of all time releases. Now, *The Witcher 3's* director, along with his new studio, Rebel Wolves, is creating a new dark fantasy action-RPG, and we couldn't be more hyped for it.

The Blood of Dawnwalker

promises a lore-rich, cinematic narrative world in which every decision you make will have an impact on its mature, engrossing story. It sounds incredible, and you can get the inside scoop starting on page 38.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



ROBIN VALENTINE
Twitter
@robinlvalentine

This month
Toured PC Gamer Towers with his one-man improv show, Valentine's Day. It closed on opening night.



IAN EVENDEN
Twitter
@ieunden

This month
Was made curator of the PCG Towers museum. Argued with Murray the Demonic Skull over pay.



LAUREN MORTON
Twitter
@ComradeCupcake_

This month
Commanded tiny people to poop in small bathrooms. Oh, and in *The Sims 4* she...



KARA PHILLIPS
Twitter
@KaraPhillipsA

This month
Plotted mischief with her motley crew of malefactor minions. Stole Monster Munch.

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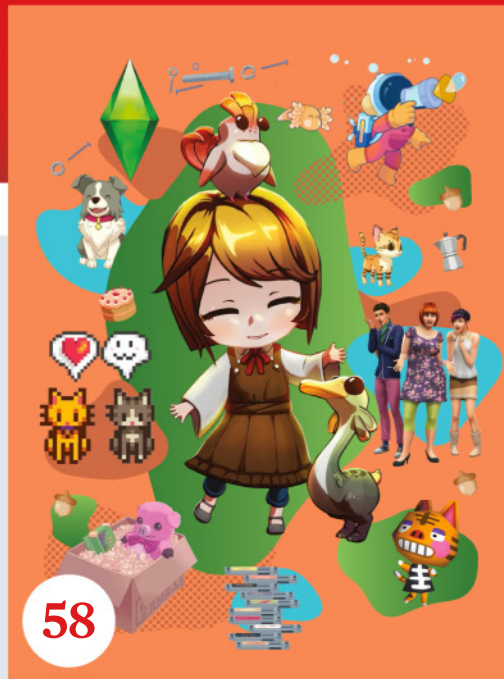
Ian Evenden speaks to the devs behind *A Little to the Left* about the cosy game genre's growing appeal, as well as making their own hit wholesome games.

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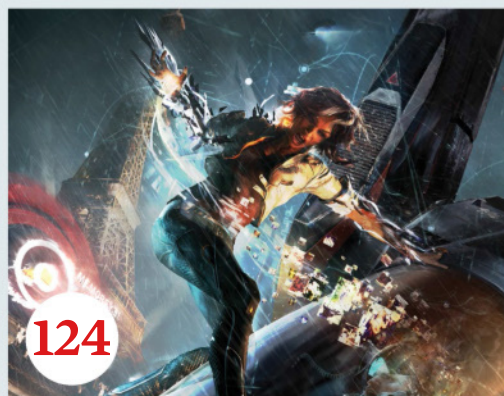
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Was *Remember Me* underrated?

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Tactical Breach Wizards, *Potionomics*, *Deadlock*, *Metaphor: Refantazio*, more!

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Fallout is, of course, one of the bloodiest games out there.

THE OLD ULTRAVIOLENCE

Fallout's co-creator says only we can stop videogame bloodshed

After thousands of hours spent in combat with orcs, androids and enemy militants, it's become harder to find novelty in videogame violence. While Steam overflows with trucks, farms and city builders for when I've grown battle-weary, violence remains the mode of interaction, even in triple-A RPGs that tout player freedom. *Fallout* co-creator Tim Cain says that's not going to change as long as we all keep buying it.

In a YouTube video that went public on New Year's Day, Cain responded

to a viewer who asked whether he thinks we'll ever see triple-A RPGs move beyond violence as the default way for players to interact with the world. Cain's answer was simple: big-budget RPGs will centre combat as long as combat sells. "Companies make games – and in general, products – that people will buy,"

**BIG-BUDGET RPGS
WILL CENTRE
COMBAT AS LONG AS
COMBAT SELLS**

Cain said. "That's it. It means games that sell the most, and I'm not even talking about review the best, just sell the most, will dictate future games."

Cain said action-RPGs like *Diablo*, broadly speaking, tend to outsell CRPGs that might feature more dialogue in part because combat is simpler to market. "When you watch a trailer and you see people actually doing things – jumping, climbing, shooting, punching – it looks like, 'Whoa! Look at all the things you can do in that game,'" Cain said. As a point of comparison, Cain explained that during his time as game director on *The Outer Worlds*, Obsidian ran into

NEXT-GEN GRAPHICS

BLACKWELL IS HERE



Nvidia announced its first 50-series graphics cards, and the DLSS 4 tech they can use should, according to the GPU giant, multiply framerates by up to 8x over traditional rendering. This is probably what allows them to claim the RTX 5070 will offer RTX 4090 performance for just £539. ■ **JF**

BACK IN BLOCK

MINECRAFT SUCCESSOR?



Minecraft's creator Markus 'Notch' Persson has shared that his next game will be a spiritual successor to *Minecraft*, even though the project started as a roguelike. But after asking his X followers what they want, *Minecraft 2* was the answer, so that's what the people will get. ■ **KP**

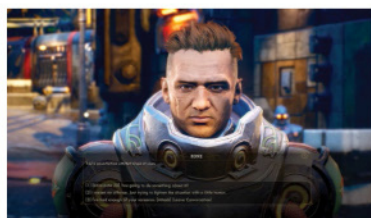
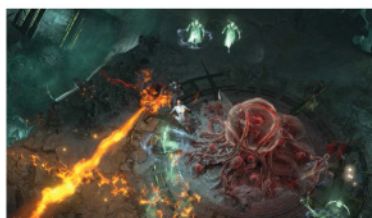


BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

OBLIVION WE DESERVED



Some *Morrowind* modders have been making the parts of the province that Bethesda didn't get to for 25 years now. So, they took a break... in order to make *Oblivion* instead. *Project Cyrodill* is a quest to make *Oblivion*'s home region in *Morrowind*, and its first expansion is out now. ■ **JW**



TOP: He's OK, folks!

ABOVE: Games filled with combat are easier to market.

difficulties finding a marketing strategy that would highlight its non-combat elements in preview trailers

DRAW THE LINE

"How do we show that this game has a really good story? How do we show that it has fantastic dialogue? How do you do that in a trailer that may only be 15 or 30 seconds long?" Cain said. "You have to reduce this wonderful narrative that's super creative and nuanced that has a huge arc down to a soundbite."

But Cain urged viewers not to feel like voting with their wallets is useless, "It's just one of those things that you have to draw the line somewhere and everyone draws it in a different spot."

I think we'd all have to draw a pretty thick line to make a noticeable mark on the market share when those multimillion dollar marketing budgets are in play. Cain seems more optimistic, however, that "companies will listen" if enough players decide they'd like a bit less combat, please.

"To not draw a line because you think it won't matter is a way to guarantee it won't matter," Cain said. "It's like when people say, 'I don't vote because my one vote won't matter.' Once enough people think that way, it matters." ■ **Lincoln Carpenter**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Critical hit

Larian's Swen Vincke called out the game industry and told it to start putting devs and players first.

Power through

Underselling indie game *Endlight* is putting out 20 seasons of content.

Royal flush

Balatro has absorbed eight new crossovers in its quest to turn all videogames into playing cards.

Busted flush

PEGI won't budge on *Balatro*'s 18+ rating, despite games with actual gambling getting lower age limits.

Belongs in a museum

Did you get a free *Indiana Jones* key from Humble? No you didn't: the storefront revoked them all even if you already redeemed yours.

Where there's smoke...

Banned *CoD* players are in uproar about its new bong gun. Hmm.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is a master of many things. Upside down kisses in the rain. Extreme tiddlywinks. Whoopee cushion placement. You name it, The Spy has an accomplishment badge sewn onto The Spy's pants for it.

The Spy is also a master of perceiving strange ripples in the PC game industry continuum. Odd, beguiling, metaphysical patterns that seem to hint at, tantalisingly, a greater force at play in the PC gaming industry than even his most holy of holies, Lord Gaben. Cthulu is a distinct possibility, of course. The Spy is well acquainted with the The Great Dreamer's mischief. But, no. More likely... the fates, perhaps, weaving their web? The Spy saw them once, you know, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. At ancient Sicycon they were, spinning the fates of PC gamers, for Leeroy Jenkins was always destined to go solo. This was as inevitable as the turning of the world.

A recent perturbation in the continuum detected by The Spy is the current fate of Arkane Lyon, the France-based sister studio to the, as of May last year, shuttered former great Arkane Austin, the studio behind such critically acclaimed single-player action-adventure immersive sim games as *Dishonored* and *Prey*. Arkane Austin was known as a master of the genre.

However, following Microsoft's acquisition of Arkane Studios, Arkane Austin then announced it was working on *Redfall*, the now infamous live-service, online co-operative multiplayer shooter that bombed so hard at release it led to refunds being issued. Within the same month of the game being released, Microsoft then shuttered Arkane Austin. Why a studio that had excelled at one type of game would then make a totally different kind of live-service, multiplayer game remains a mystery. Although The Spy can have a damn good guess.

OPEN SEASON ON SUCKHEADS

Which is why it feels just a little bit odd to The Spy that, right now, Arkane Lyon (*Dishonored*, *Deathloop*), the surviving branch of Arkane Studios, is working on *Marvel's Blade*, an upcoming action-adventure game that, according to secret pitch documents and concept art seen by The Spy,

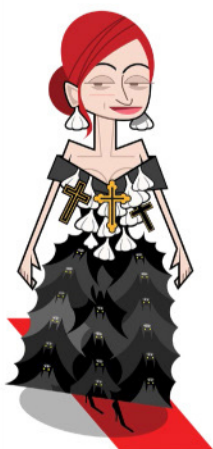
is a standalone title and much more aligned to Arkane's usual output.

Aside from a notable switch from Arkane's familiar first-person perspective, with *Marvel's Blade* being a third-person perspective action-adventure title, The Spy has purloined plenty of other positive signs of this return to alignment. In terms of narrative, the game is set in Paris, France, where Eric 'Blade' Brooks is dispatched to deal with a congregation of vampires who have taken over a large portion of the city.

Further, The Spy can report that, after eavesdropping on Arkane's studio director, Dinga Bakaba, deep within Arkane's Lyon-based headquarters, *Marvel's Blade* is a 'narrative-driven, immersive, third-person' experience and a 'very Arkane game'. In addition, while in Arkane's HQ The Spy spotted

that both Dana Nightingale and Sebastien Mitton, two devs who had a large hand in the *Dishonored* series, were both working on *Marvel's Blade*, as campaign director and art director respectively.

Is this a sign of the PC gaming industry righting itself? Only the fates know for sure. Spy out. ■
The Spy



THE SPY

Last night The Spy dreamt that The Spy went to Manderlay again.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



ENIX EXPECTATIONS

The success of rival JRPG series highlights **FINAL FANTASY**'s struggles

Who is *Final Fantasy* for these days?" is a question without an obvious answer, but it's one that Square Enix must reckon with. *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* and *Final Fantasy XVI* failed to meet sales expectations according to Square's own financial report, creating a whirlwind of takes on why, and *Final Fantasy*'s future in general.

What seems clear is that the era of *Final Fantasy* as the Japanese role-playing game series that comes to mind when the genre comes up has ended. That's not to say no new *Final Fantasy* will fly off shelves, but the last 15 years have shown that it is, more often than not, selling a few million copies per game rather than 10 million-plus, like *Final Fantasy XV* managed. Which means that the issue has at least as much to do with Square's expectations as those of fans or potential fans.

Despite this, Japanese RPGs are thriving. Nihon Falcom never had the massive international breakout of Square nor Enix in the 1980s or '90s, but it's seeing unprecedented success now with its tentpole franchise, *Trails*, owing to the massive growth in the series' popularity outside of Japan.

Atlus' *Persona* games used to sell just a few hundred thousand copies, but *Persona 5* has become an institution

unto itself – with over 12 million sales between its releases and spin-offs. Sega switched its long-running *Yakuza* (now *Like a Dragon*) games from beat 'em up adventures to RPGs akin to *Dragon Quest*; they've only become more popular. *Dragon Quest* itself outsold every other 2024 game in Japan in one week with a 2D remake.

JRPGs are doing very well, even if elements of the genre are now more ubiquitous than the genre itself. Part of what made *Final Fantasy* stand out at its peak was that JRPGs weren't as widely accepted: many of the games you think of as classics weren't selling like *Final Fantasy*, or only sold well in Japan.

Final Fantasy managed to be cutting edge with its storytelling, with its visuals, with its tendency to experiment and forcibly evolve the genre in a way that broke through to the mainstream more regularly than any other Japanese RPG franchise.

The first six *Final Fantasy* games were released between 1987 and 1994. The PlayStation had three in four years. Since then the escalating cost and length of development for each new entry has meant fewer games that take forever to make and evolve less, as *Final Fantasy* begins to play more like existing popular game to maintain mainstream attention.

Meanwhile, Falcom's pumping out *Trails* games despite massive scripts, interconnected storytelling that resembles



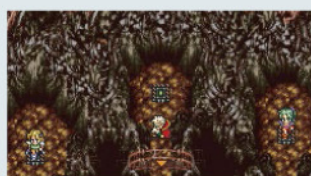
Shrinking Fantasy

Square Enix's various HD-2D games and franchises like *Bravely Default* are comparatively smaller experiences that have picked up much of the classic *Final Fantasy* feel, while that series grows in size and scope. Modern Square has shown itself capable of thriving at this scale; what would happen if it attempted to make an actual *Final Fantasy* in this style again?



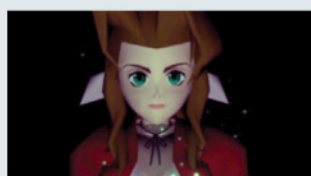
LEFT: You can familiarise yourself with so many NPCs who have nothing to do with the main story of *Trails* games that returning to this world feels like seeing an old friend again.

GRAPHICAL SHOWCASE *Final Fantasy historically pushes the hardware it's on*



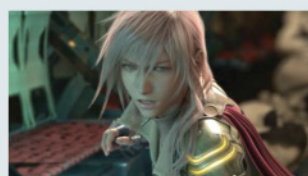
XVI-BIT GLORY

Final Fantasy VI's character sprites had one consistent size, separating them visually from past Square RPGs.



FINAL FANTASY 3D

Final Fantasy VII introduced CG cutscenes, which helped players form closer connections to the characters.



FINAL FANTASY, NOW IN HD

The shift to high definition meant even more detailed cutscenes and characters – Lightning's design is beautiful.



FINAL FANTASY, NOW EVEN MORE HD

Square Enix clearly spent considerable time on Final Fantasy XVI's visuals.

fantasy novels more than games, and huge, deep worlds. There have been 13 in the series' first 20 years – in the same stretch, *Final Fantasy* got from FFXII to FFXVII. *Like a Dragon* is switching back-and-forth between action spin-offs and its much lengthier mainline RPGs, never leaving fans wanting or waiting for the next adventure.

One of the open secrets here is Falcom and Sega's comfort with reusing assets and locations. No one is going to criticise the production values of *Like a Dragon* games, and *Trails* has seen obvious boosts to production value, too. These franchises happily return to old art and game structures, leaving plenty of development time and budget to focus on justifying another trip down familiar roads.

You know what you're getting into when you start a *Trails*, *Like a Dragon*, *Dragon Quest* or *Persona* game. You can explain exactly what these games are to someone showing interest.

Trails won't outsell *Final Fantasy*, but it's not budgeted to, and neither is *Like a Dragon*. Neither fails to evolve or grow. 2024's *Trails through Daybreak* mixed action RPG elements into its turn-based setup for a new strategic blend that will also be used in the upcoming *Trails in the Sky* remake. But in the same way a *Dragon Quest* game is always clearly a *Dragon Quest* game, they're telling different and new stories with changing mechanics. Balancing consistency with new ideas has fostered smaller, dedicated fanbases that have their publishers thrilled, their expectations met or exceeded.

It's hard to see the same lineage or consistency with modern *Final Fantasy*. Square titled a kinda-sequel

reimagining of a beloved game *Remake* for meta wordplay reasons; it's the first of three remakes, all of which have drastically different gameplay from the original. That's fine! But expectations should be better set for that sort of project. There are a few reasons the middle entry of the trilogy might not sell as well as the first: playing so differently from the original, or the remake only being 2/3 finished, or the dramatic shift towards an Ubisoft-esque open-world experience.

As with *Final Fantasy XVI*, PlayStation 5 exclusivity didn't help matters. Going multiplatform won't solve the identity crisis, however, one worsened by FFXVII's switch to action RPG.

FRANCHISES HAPPILY RETURN TO OLD ART AND GAME STRUCTURES

RETAIN THAT QUALITY

Final Fantasy is not what it once was, culturally, but it can still retain that quality. Square needs to take a lesson from the thriving franchises

around it and figure out just what *Final Fantasy* is supposed to be, like with *Trails* and *Like a Dragon*. Each of their sequels push their respective envelopes without betraying expectations, and are available on less powerful hardware.

Maybe *Final Fantasy* doesn't need to be as big of a production anymore – to reflect the fact that it is, as a phenomenon, not as big as it used to be. Maybe that change would better define the series and who is even interested in it, all while allowing room for the experimentation that helped make *Final Fantasy* what it was in the first place. ■

Marc Normandin



Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 REVO

Sega's iconic versus fighter arrives on PC after 20 years

Courtesy of the Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, the talented devs behind the long-running *Yakuza* series, Sega is finally bringing *Virtua Fighter 5* to PC, and it's doing so in its *Ultimate Showdown* version, which is the latest update released in Japan and the game that is still played in Japanese arcades today.

Under the stewardship of Masayoshi Yokoyama, *Virtua Fighter 5 REVO* arrives on PC using Ryu Ga Gotoku's in-house Dragon Engine, which is the engine used in all *Yakuza* games. As a result, max resolution has been lifted to 4K, while 60fps is guaranteed. The game's netcode for online battles has



DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI

Marco is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on its PC, console and arcade industry since 1996. Not many people know this, but when he's not delivering world-exclusive scoops for PC Gamer, he's directing Motoko Kusanagi as chief of Public Security Section 9.

also been reworked and tested, promising to bring a "new level" of multiplayer action.

When playing the game's beta, the series' typical speed and dynamism is very evident, but also mutated to be more aggressive and immediate, evocative of *Tekken 8*'s Rage and Heat system. The control system hasn't required a big overhaul either as, unlike

**MAX RESOLUTION
HAS BEEN LIFTED
TO 4K WHILE 60FPS
IS GUARANTEED**

other fighting series, *Virtua Fighter*'s creator Yu Suzuki (the Japanese dev behind famous games like *Out Run* and *Shenmue*), designed it as a simplified three-button-only system, with only guard, punch and kick on offer.

REVO is clearly the first attempt from Sega in nearly 20 years to get into the esports market, but also to act as a testbed for *Virtua Fighter 6*, which is already in development. Technically the specs to run *REVO* are very accessible, with just an Intel Core i5-7600/AMD Ryzen 3 1300X and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 1050Ti/AMD Radeon RX 570 required to run the game.

Aside from the regular version of the game, there's also a 30th anniversary edition that will include all the music from the previous games, as well as art from pre-production of the series' first iconic chapter, among other things. *REVO* is officially available from January 27, 2025, only on Steam. shorturl.at/ZvTol



FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Square-Enix speeds up its departure from PS5 exclusives

We said it on these pages back in September 2024 (check issue 401) that Japanese publishers are abandoning Sony's exclusives policy, and Square Enix's president Takashi Kiryu truly showed it off last month when, in front of the whole world at The Game Awards, he announced without any prior notice that *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* will be available for PC this month.

The second instalment of the everlasting JRPG saga sees the remake trilogy continue under

the guidance of Yoshinori Kitase and Tetsuya Nomura.

Rebirth picks up the *FFVII Remake* story, following hero Cloud Strife and his companions, after they escape from the dystopian city of Midgar and proceed on an epic adventure across the planet while pursuing series antagonist Sephiroth. Expect plenty of action, as well as chocobo riding.

Recommended system specs are an Intel Core i7-8700/AMD Ryzen 5 5600 and a GeForce RTX 2070/Radeon RX 6700 XT. Available from Jan 23, 2025. shorturl.at/w0DB5

TALES OF GRACES F REMASTERED

The Wii's best-selling JRPG arrives on PC

Considered by Famitsu to be one of the best games of all time, *Tales of Graces* is the foremost chapter of this long-running JRPG saga. The *Tales* series has been Namco's response to the RPG genre for, literally, decades, but *Tales of Graces* was initially released in Japan only on Wii. However, its stratospheric sales, forced Bandai Namco to release it for the PS3 too, which saw its sales top almost 200,000.

And now, due to a new-found focus on PC gaming within the Japanese gaming industry,

Bandai Namco is releasing the remastered version of *Tales of Graces* for PC, too.

Minimum specs start at an Intel Core i3-8100/AMD Ryzen 3 3100 and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 550Ti/AMD Radeon HD 7770, while recommended specs sit at an Intel Core i5-8400/AMD Ryzen 5 2600 and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 560Ti/AMD Radeon HD 7790.

A *Deluxe Edition* of the game is also available, delivering a cool digital artbook and a great soundtrack. Available from Jan 16, 2025, on Steam. shorturl.at/rtrte7



SUPER RAPID FIRE 68K

A shmup classic gets updated

Finally this month, shoot 'em up fans can grab an updated version of classic vertical scroller *Cho Ren Sha 68K*, which has not only been updated by its original creator, Koichi Yoshida, but is also 100% playable on modern Windows systems. *Cho Ren Sha 68K*, which translates in English to *Super Rapid Fire 68K*, was originally released back in 1995 on the Sharp X68000, a now legendary Japanese-exclusive PC, and soon became known as one of the system's very best games. If you like technicolour bullet hell shmups that boast numerous power-ups and huge bosses, then *Super Rapid Fire 68K* is well worth grabbing. shorturl.at/12R11

1 month



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

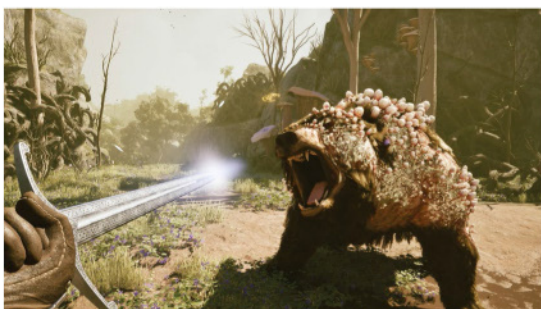
The latest instalment in the long-running 4X strategy series, *Civ VII* lets you create kingdoms and rule as many legendary leaders throughout history.



KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Warhorse Studios

Henry and Hans return for more medieval adventures. A massive open world that's twice the size of the original game as well as expanded combat system are on offer.

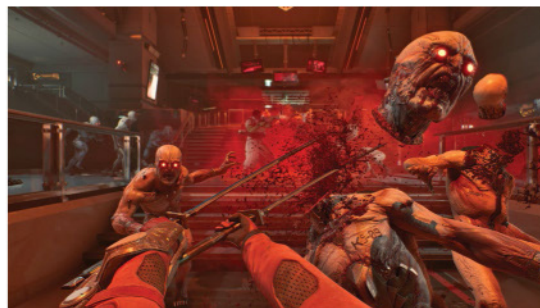


AVOWED

RELEASE February 18, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian

The anticipated first-person fantasy RPG that is definitely not like *Skyrim*. A small delay means *Skyrim* fans can now look forward to playing it in February, 2025.

2 months



KILLING FLOOR 3

RELEASE March, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Tripwire Interactive

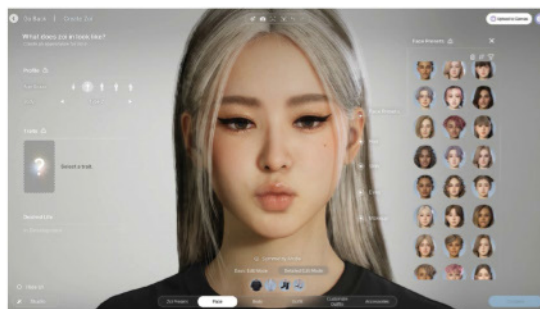
In the far future of 2091 join the resistance group, Nightfall, and fight hordes of bioengineered monsters called zeds that threaten to end humanity.



ATOMFALL

RELEASE March 27, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rebellion

A western version of *STALKER* that is set in the British countryside, *Atomfall* is a survival-action game set in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Cricket bats guaranteed.



INZOI

RELEASE March 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Krafton

A graphically impressive new *The Sims* rival. Create, take control of, and observe the lives of Zois, with deep new customisation and construction options on offer.

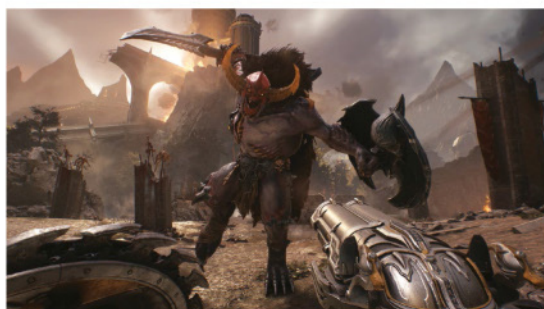
3 months



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

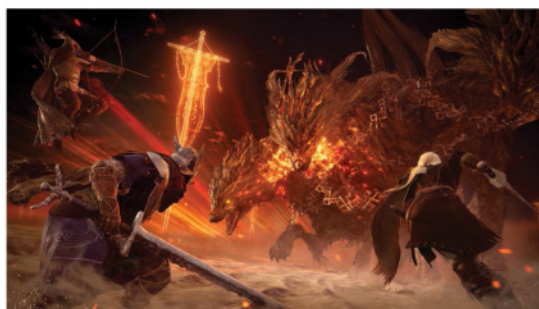
4 months+



BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!



ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware, Inc.

The out of left field Elden Ring spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike RPG. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.



MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13

Uncover the origins of Italy's mafia in a gritty mob story set in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. A visually rich new cinematic third-person action-adventure.

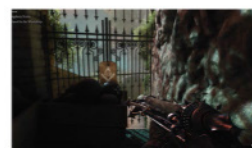
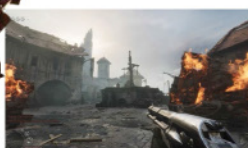
MOD

ADVENTURE FASTER

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle is a fantastic stealth-action game, but getting to the fun on PC requires sitting through a load of intro videos each time. So, why not bin them off and get to the great adventuring and puzzle-solving faster? This easy to install mod does just that: tinyurl.com/3vmsphuu







NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
The Astronauts

PUBLISHER
The Astronauts

LINK
theastronauts.com

WITCHFIRE

A potent cocktail of inspirations
by and for *Destiny* sickos

Witchfire is one of those games that's hard to even define without context. Its store page describes it as a 'dark fantasy RPG shooter', which could describe any of a dozen FPS wizard 'em ups. So let's set the record straight, and let me explain why you shouldn't be sleeping on this deeply compelling Early Access tribute to *Destiny*'s combat sandbox.

Now, to call *Witchfire* a *Destiny* clone would also be deeply reductive. This is a rich, meaty stew of elements and ideas borrowed from other games, put together in a way that feels familiar and comforting for lifelong FPS freaks, but also distinct. There's a little bit of *Dark Souls* in there, a pinch of *Bloodborne* (especially in its grim gunslinging gothic fantasy setting), a little bit of *Slay the Spire*'s structure and even a dash of extraction shooter tension, but no one part describes the whole experience.

Speaking with Adrian Chmielarz, creative lead at The Astronauts, conveying the nature of *Witchfire* has always been a challenge. "We had this long description where we called *Witchfire* a dark fantasy first-person shooter that merges elements of roguelites, Soulslikes and extraction games into a new but cohesive experience, but this sounds weak and honestly tells you nothing, really." And he'd be right. So let's focus on the heart of this shooter: *Destiny*, Bungie's often controversial live-service shooter.

Witchfire feels like an experiment in condensing that MMO-lite monster down into a singleplayer experience, starting with its level structure.

Unlike your average singleplayer FPS, *Witchfire* is set across six explorable, non-linear zones. They're not massive, able to be traversed in just a couple of minutes, but built for replayability, and dripping with dark gothic vibes and vistas. Each map is a warren of starting and exit points, alternative routes, hidden areas and battlegrounds that can play host to an ever-shuffling assortment of procedural encounters against a roster of undead knights, musketeers, grenade-launching hulks and the occasional mossy wood-monster, channelling European folklore. All of them capable of taking big chunks out of your non-regenerating health pool.

GONE ROGUE

Each run through a zone is loosely structured like a modern roguelite; you drop in through a portal, and tackle marked Easy, Regular or Elite enemy encounters on the map in whatever order you see fit, each one rewarding you with resources and a choice of an Arcana perk that'll last until you die or return to base, building you up for a final encounter against one of the game's bosses. Whether you go the distance or tap out early is a choice, but every step, you'll be trying your luck.

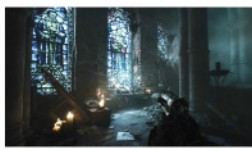
And if that luck runs out, you can die and lose much of the treasure and *Witchfire* (the *Dark Souls*-esque hybrid experience and currency equivalent) you acquired, unless you make a run back through the map you died on to recover your goodies where they fell. While nowhere near as punishing as competitive extraction shooters, it does add a little bit of tension, and some stakes for pushing your luck. While you can never lose progress thanks to enemies regularly dropping crystallised *Witchfire* that sits safely in your inventory until interacted with (another smart *Dark Souls* nod), failure can slow you down, making a smooth and successful sortie a satisfying experience.

It's an unusually self-directed game, but *Witchfire* is all about letting you pick your poison. While there's some

PLAYED
IT

**EACH RUN THROUGH A ZONE
IS LOOSELY STRUCTURED
LIKE A MODERN ROGUELITE**

Witchfire



➤ progression objective to complete at any given point – a boss to kill, a map to unlock, or a new side area to explore – the process of preparing for that is always a little unpredictable. The perks you'll get to pick from after each encounter are random, the location of enemy spawns is procedural, and sometimes you'll just be caught off-guard even on the 20th run through a familiar map. The architecture may remain static, but the experience is not, especially once you start raising the stakes.

PRO-GNOSIS

Witchfire is now in its second year of Early Access, and first surfaced back in 2023 as an Epic Store exclusive. I'll admit to being fashionably late to this party, first playing it back in October 2024, so I asked Chmielarz what the biggest shift in the game has been since those early Epic days. I was surprised to learn that one of what I considered the most fundamental features of the game was a late addition. "The single biggest change we've done was to separate the difficulty from levelling up," he says. "Previously, when you grew in power, the witch threw more and more dangerous enemies at you. We changed it so now the difficulty is tied to your level of Gnosis, which is a separate feature, like Insight in *Bloodborne*."

The Gnosis system is how *Witchfire* handles progression between runs. Each time you complete a quest to raise your Gnosis level, the game grows more intense. New systems and upgrade options become available in your gothic monastery hideout. New enemies start turning up in old locations. New events and side-missions are added to the procedural pools. New traps and wrinkles appear, but also more opportunities to claim big rewards, as new optional paths and even side-dungeons unlock in areas you might have patrolled a dozen times.

When I first started playing *Witchfire* it wasn't until I gained my first Gnosis level that the game properly clicked. It's hard to get a feel for what it's doing mechanically until it plays its hand at that point, which takes several hours and multiple runs through the game's first area. At the moment, if *Witchfire* has one

issue, it's conveying what the player should be doing, and what their motivation is. When asked about this, Chmielarz suggested that while initial guidance will improve, *Witchfire*'s opacity is still largely intentional, and perhaps not a game for those without some other shooters under their belt.

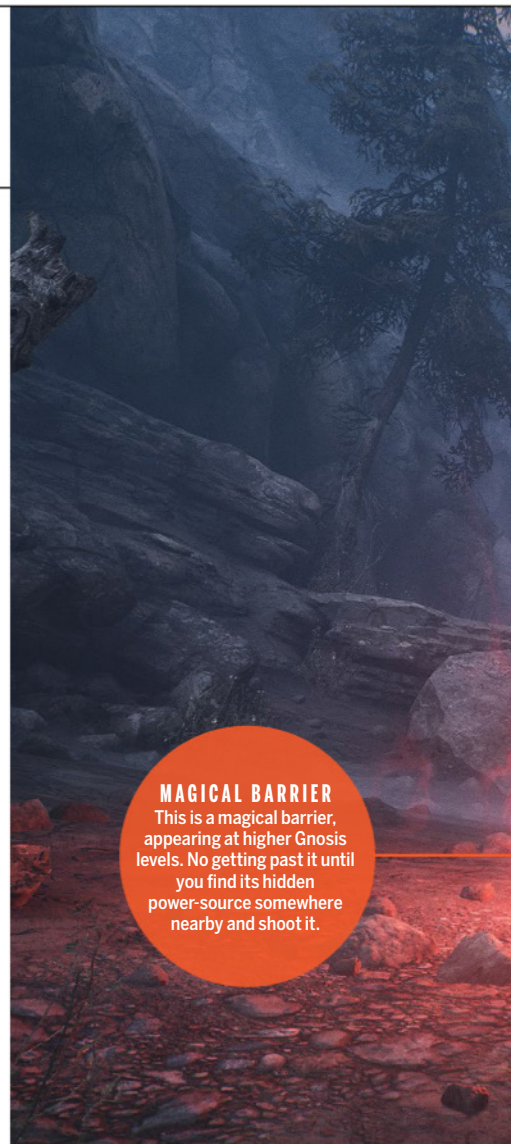
"We do not want the players to be forced to figure out the mechanics themselves and we will keep on improving that aspect of the game. However, we are pretty hard core when it comes to two other things. First, we consider *Witchfire* a gamer's game. Meaning we will not be explaining how to turn around or that you need to press Fire to fire a gun. Second, the world will be as new and cryptic to you as it is to the protagonist. In other words, there's no hint system in *Witchfire*."

BLACK POWDER

Another area where the game is obviously cribbing from *Destiny* is in its weapons. Specifically, taking everything good and stripping away the MMO looter-shooter fluff. Each of *Witchfire*'s 13 primary guns feels like one of *Destiny*'s most interesting Uniques. When first acquired, they're a pretty standard assortment of pistols, rifles, shotguns and SMGs differentiated by little more than fire rate, accuracy and range, but through usage and spending resources (most commonly dropped by mini-bosses) each unlocks three traits that permanently change how they work.

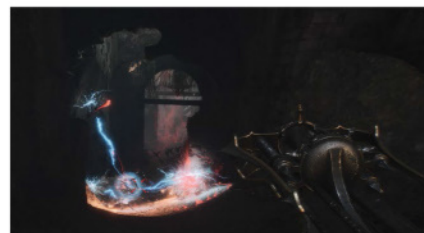
My favourite pump shotgun, Echo, first gains pellets that explode shortly after impact, applying the Burn status effect. The second upgrade makes enemies fly back when killed, and the secondary explosion can now burn enemies near to the launched, soon-to-be-exploded corpse, while the third upgrade partially reloads and doubles the damage while doing a running slide. Not only do those upgrades encourage me to play like some kind of howling shotgun-toting pyromaniac, sliding into stragglers and blasting them back into swarms, but it dovetails with any Arcana perks that amplify Burn damage.

Every weapon boasts this level of technical escalation. The *Painkiller*-inspired stake gun, Striga, has its hefty wooden bolts ignite after some time in the air, turning it into a rocket launcher at range, but also a precision weapon, as headshots spread arcing lightning between nearby enemies, making it a



MAGICAL BARRIER

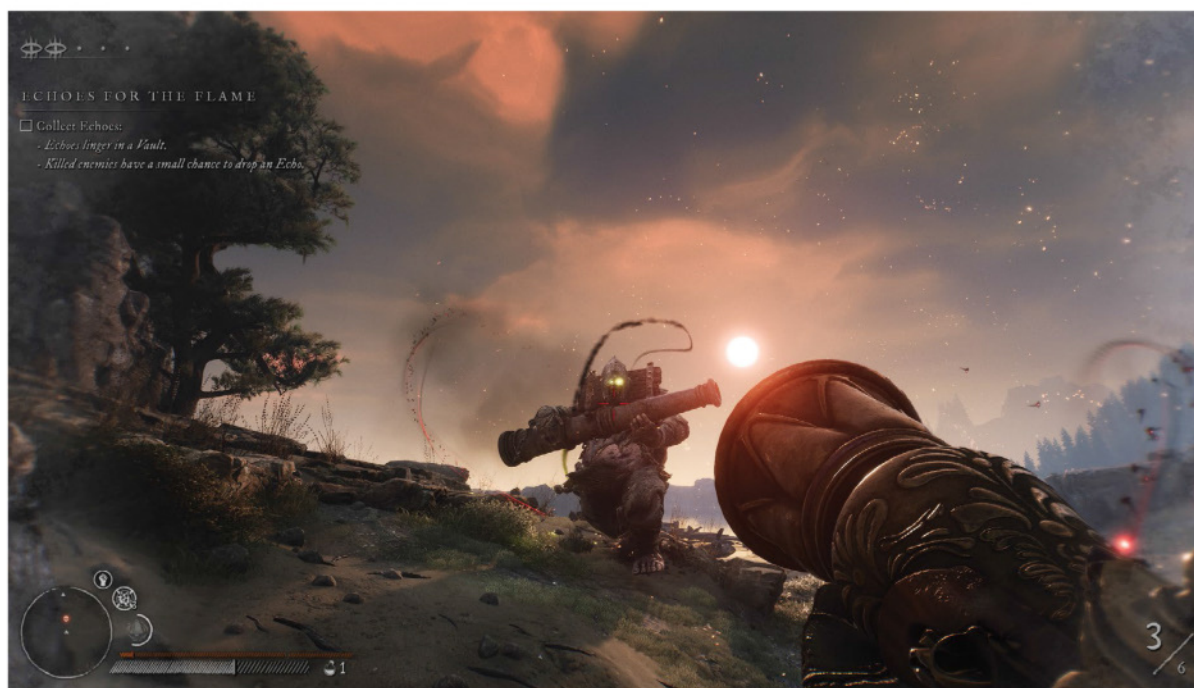
This is a magical barrier, appearing at higher Gnosis levels. No getting past it until you find its hidden power-source somewhere nearby and shoot it.



Take too many hits on a run and expect trouble, like so.



IT WASN'T UNTIL I GAINED MY FIRST GNOSIS LEVEL THAT THE GAME PROPERLY CLICKED



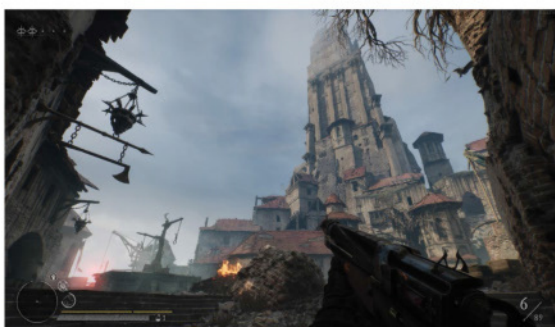
LEFT: The tanky Galley Slave is one of the game's first bosses.

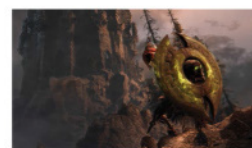
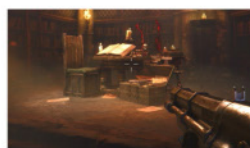
Witchfire



RIGHT: *Witchfire* may be grim and gothic, but it has some lovely sunsets.

FAR RIGHT: *Painkiller*'s stake gun returns, and still nails bad guys to walls.





➤ versatile hybrid of sniper, artillery and explosive that's also surprisingly useful up close to due to a lack of reticle bloom. It makes picking just two guns a tough decision, but I've yet to grow bored of mixing and matching my loadout.

Of course, any game riffing off *Destiny* needs to nail the rhythms and feeling of its gunplay. That sense of being a super-powered gunslinger, juggling loud, satisfying weapons and magic powers while effortlessly double-jumping around danger. A tough feat in itself, but part of the reason I keep coming back to *Witchfire* is because it nails it.

Chmielarz confirmed that, as huge fans of Bungie's shooter, capturing its gun-feel was a core design goal, though there are some areas in which the game is aiming to improve on its inspirations. "*Destiny* has, to me, the best feel of guns in any shooter... but I am not a big fan of the art direction of *Destiny 2*. I prefer *Destiny 1* more, it's grittier, less shiny, more organic. This is a reminder that art direction is more important than tech."

VIBE CHECK

More important, perhaps, but *Witchfire* is no slouch on the tech front. Despite being made by a relatively small 20-person studio, I'm confident in saying that *Witchfire* is one of the prettiest looking Unreal engine shooters around, as you can see from the screenshots surrounding my words here. And for all its looks, *Witchfire* is remarkably scalable, running at a mostly consistent 60fps on the Steam Deck.

That art direction isn't to be sniffed at either. Everything in this game is just dripping with grimdark gothic vibes, building on an interesting fantastical alt-history setting where witches and the devil are real and have humanity on the ropes. The player takes on the role of a Preyer, part of the Pope's personal special ops team of gunslinging, immortal witch-hunter generals.

It's a fun setting on paper, but without much narrative presented up front, it's more vibes than narrative, at least at the moment. Great vibes, granted, but I'm touching on the narrative so late here because at the moment it is the gunplay,

the atmosphere and the unique progression mechanics that are the reasons to play *Witchfire* in Early Access. Narrative takes a distant back-seat, though that might be changing with the next planned major update, giving players the first look at Witch Mountain, the game's 'endgame' zone.

PEAK GAMING

Originally envisioned as a 'boss rush' type area where the player will be fighting through powered-up versions of the previous bosses before confronting the (previously-unseen) Witch herself. Standard enough, but The Astronauts recently made the decision to rework it conceptually, and while he was unable to give me any early peeks at the next zone, Chmielarz did share some details on what's coming. "Inside the witch mountain is an ancient alien labyrinth where you and your *Witchfire* horde fight against the witch's army, affecting the world outside. This feels more like war rather than a boss fight. And yeah, it is risky as hell because everything in it is new and something we have not done before." Intriguing stuff, and while he was keen to stress that the team are still experimenting a lot with the new area's design and mechanics, it shouldn't be too far from initial release.

Not that this means *Witchfire* is anywhere near complete – this will be the first look at the final zone, but there's another two explorable regions yet to come, plus more granular Gnosis levels to ease the game's difficulty curve a little. The Astronauts aim to wrap up production within the next year, but nothing is set in stone. So the big question is whether it's worth your time and money right now, and that all hinges on what you're looking for. As a lapsed *Destiny* fan, *Witchfire* has been expertly scratching a very particular FPS itch.

For those without that same background, *Witchfire* might not hit quite as intensely, and the game is half-finished at present, with many of its systems still in flux and nothing even resembling an ending, just a deeply compelling central action and progression loop. Still, any shooter that can replicate (and in some cases improve on) the feel of Bungie's best is worth a look at the very least. Whether that's now or once the game is closer to completion is your call to make, but in my books, this is one of the most interesting upcoming shooters of 2025.

Dominic Tarason



EVERYTHING IN THIS GAME IS JUST DRIPPING WITH GRIMDARK GOTHIC VIBES

PREVIEW

Marvel's Spider-Man 2



ABOVE: Ray tracing, DLSS and FSR are expected to push the game to the limit.

RIGHT: Imagine a horde mode dedicated to Spidey's rogues gallery.



Marvel's Spider-Man 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

January 30, 2025

DEVELOPER

Insomniac, Nixxes Software

PUBLISHER

PlayStation Publishing LLC

LINK

insomniac.games

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Is there anything better than a Spidey sequel to start 2025?

Following the ports of *Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered* and *Miles Morales* back in 2022, Sony has now sped up the process of PlayStation to PC with *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*. So, what better way to kick off 2025 than swinging through the streets with the highest performance and fidelity possible?

In fact, this is now a 15-month turnaround for *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* compared to the 47 months fans had to wait for the first Spidey release on Windows, and two years for the Miles spinoff. It seems Sony is finally realising the financial benefits of bringing its biggest titles to the platform, while those on Steam and the Epic Games Store can revel in accessing one of the best games of this generation earlier than anticipated.

Even though the official specs have yet to be unveiled (as of the time of writing), there are plenty of reasons to get excited about the superhero sequel. For one, the game is being handled by Dutch developer Nixxes Software, a subsidiary of Sony that has worked on everything from *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart* to *Ghost of Tsushima Director's Cut* to most recently, *Horizon Zero Dawn Remastered*. The studio is also set to usher *The Last of Us Part II Remastered* onto PC later this year, having cemented itself as the gold standard in the industry.

A "suite of enhanced features, including enhanced ray-tracing options, to take full advantage of a variety of setups

and configurations" was confirmed by Nixxes community manager Julian Huijbregts in October 2024. Additionally, all of the previously released post-launched content such as New Game Plus, Mission Replay, increased difficulty, Photo Mode features, extra endgame challenges and all 90 suits will arrive on day one. It's the complete experience.

Sure, the lack of any story downloadable content is disappointing considering the ample opportunities to keep fans happy until the inevitable sequel – just like *The City That Never Sleeps* expansion did back in 2018. Still, the temptation to double dip and experience the game at 120fps with widescreen support, DLSS, FSR and better ray tracing can't be underestimated.

After all, this will, in theory, be the most polished version of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*. From my initial playthrough on PS5, I did experience my fair share of clipping. Little things like models not fully generating on occasion or dialogue not lining up with characters' mouths during cutscenes. The most common was when a crime appeared on the now twice-as-large map, only to vanish as soon as I got close.

NEW INFO

REPLAY OR SKIP?

Speaking of which, if there's no story DLC, how about expanding the numerous spawnable enemies and bases? The world that's been created by Insomniac is utterly gorgeous, however, there is a noticeable step down from the first entry in things to do. I was done and dusted with the Platinum at around 25 hours whereas the original had me whipping past the 40-hour mark.

One of my favourite ideas the game bandies about is a Kraven-like arena where you fight all of Spider-Man's foes from all three games combined: Electro, Rhino, Scorpion, Vulture, Sandman, etc.

At the very least, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* looks to offer the best of both worlds. The agony of choosing between Fidelity or Performance mode on PS5 is, for the most part, eradicated. Being able to push the superhero blockbuster to the max with all the bells and whistles will be fantastic for those jumping in for the first time... though will that be enough to justify a second purchase for others?

Matt Poskitt

SONY IS FINALLY REALISING THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF BRINGING ITS TITLES TO PC

All of the post-launch PlayStation patches will launch on day one, including 90 suits.



PREVIEW

Monster Hunter Wilds





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 28, 2025

DEVELOPER

Capcom

PUBLISHER

Capcom

LINK

monsterhunter.com/wilds

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

With Wilds, Monster Hunter flaunts new storytelling chops

I've never needed much story from *Monster Hunter*. Each game's plot follows a predictable pattern: something is upsetting the ecology, and you need to battle a few dozen frenzied lizards until you and the Hunter's Guild uncover what never-before-seen creature is responsible for the turmoil.

But *Monster Hunter* never suffered for it. Its megafauna are majestic enough, its combat climactic enough, its cast of pun-slinging NPCs charming enough that even a barebones narrative could suffice. After playing through the first five hours of *Monster Hunter Wilds*, however, I'm just as excited to see more of its storytelling as I am for indulging in its latest iteration of dinosaur swordfights.

In late November, I visited Capcom's headquarters in Osaka to spend a few hours with the game and speak to its lead developers. Considering the *Wilds* open beta didn't inspire confidence in how well it'll run on PC when it launches in February, I arrived in Osaka wondering primarily about performance.

My preview session was running on a PlayStation 5, which is only so useful to compare with my experience in the Steam beta. However, while the beta's PS5 version might not have featured the origami monsters players encountered on PC, PS5 beta players reported their own framerate stumbles. Compared to those descriptions, the updated build I played in Osaka, locked in the quality-focused Resolution Mode, was smooth.

Where the open beta prescribed two prepackaged hunts with premade equipment, my Osaka demo session covered the first five hours of the finished product. From character creation through introductory quests and story-driven hunts in the game's Windward Plains and Scarlet Forest regions, I was free to hunt – with all that entails.

FANCY FOOTWORK

It didn't take long for me to start admiring the tweaks Capcom's made to the *Monster Hunter* formula. Whether battling familiar foes in the Windward Plains, like the Chatacabra and Doshaguma, or fresh opponents like the spidery Lala Barina, my hunter's ability to navigate and respond to monster attacks felt more fluid than ever.

I've lately been a hammer main in *Monster Hunter*, so I'm used to a good amount of combat mobility. But in *Wilds*, even the hammer feels more nimble. Between attack animations, many weapons have gained windows where holding the analogue stick in a direction will slightly shift the hunter's footing, giving opportunities to adjust my angle of attack or scoot out of harm's way without committing to a full dodge roll and interrupting my combo.

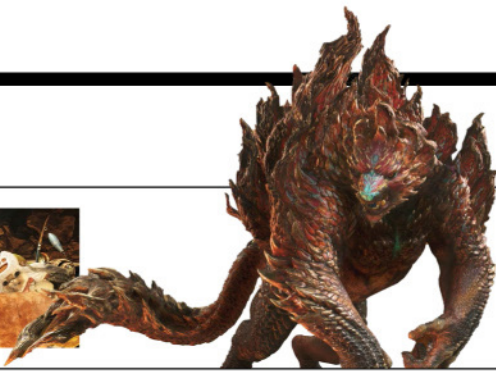
I still had to pay attention to my positioning, but I felt more willing to seek out windows for landing heavy hammer upswings because I knew I'd be less likely to find myself whiffing the monster's jaw by just a couple of inches.

That quality combat time also meant I could get familiar with *Wilds*'s new Focus Mode, which allows manually 'aiming' attacks with the left trigger. While aiming in Focus Mode, any wounded areas on the monster are highlighted. Hitting those areas with special Focus Strike attacks unleashes a heavy finisher. In practice, opening wounds and attacking them is an express route to dealing massive damage to monsters, which is apparently the idea.

"When hunting the monsters, there are hard parts of the body that when you attack it, you bounce off. It can be hard to tell when you're fighting them which parts are really affected or not," Tokuda said. "*Monster Hunter* tends to have a longer hunting play time. We wanted to make it more efficient so that [players] could hunt efficiently in a shorter amount of time."

PLAYED IT

HITTING AREAS WITH SPECIAL FOCUS STRIKE ATTACKS UNLEASHES A HEAVY FINISHER



➤ In terms of efficiency, Focus Mode works – almost too well. The wound-destroying Focus Strikes are satisfying, but in some of my preview session's low rank hunts I was opening and destroying monster wounds so constantly that it wasn't really worth it to use conventional attacks. That's a little concerning, but I'm not raising an alarm yet.

OUTFITTING UPDATES

Monster Hunter's armour skills are changing, too. In *Monster Hunter*, your equipment defines how you play. You don't have a skill tree or stat points to spend; you craft armour pieces that increase your attack, boost your ability to guard, or help sharpen your weapons more quickly. In *Wilds*, however, many of those offensive skills are now found on weapons instead.

The change, Tokuda said, was to let players use the new mid-hunt weapon swapping mechanic without feeling like they're restricted by their armour loadout. In *World* and *Rise*, my hammer and switch axe sets relied on different offensive skills; even if I could have swapped between the two, switching weapons would've immediately made a lot of the armour skills I had equipped irrelevant.

While I'm excited for the potential dual-weapon loadouts and the changes to combat, I'd have needed a few dozen more hours to plumb the depths of those revamped systems. Instead, what left the greatest impression during my preview session was *Monster Hunter's* newfound focus on storytelling.

CREATING CHARACTER

As Capcom started doling out *Wilds* reveals and preview trailers, I was sceptical about the emphasis I was seeing on cutscenes and character beats. As much as I've loved the Guildmarm and Meowscular Chefs of yesteryear, *Monster Hunter* NPCs traditionally haven't enjoyed much depth. They've mostly served as manic, madcap hype men, each with their own personal brand of pun.

Playing *Wilds*, however, I was surprised to find myself in full dialogue sequences with other characters – and even more surprised to be invested in them. Unlike

player characters in previous games, the player hunter in *Wilds* is a fully-voiced character with a preexisting hunter career, which my companions would reference and prompt me to explain. In turn, I could ask Alma, my handler, about her training at the Guild academy; I could ask Gemma, the expedition's blacksmith, about other hunter squads she's helped outfit.

I'm used to my fellow members of the Hunter's Guild feeling like a passive audience while my character handled all the work. In the early hours of *Wilds*, they feel like members of an actual organisation, composed of people with their own histories.

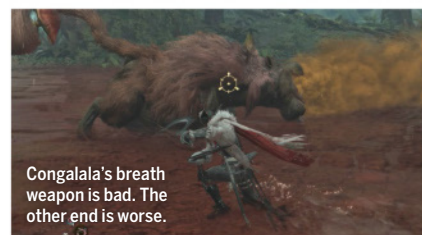
A story I'm even more interested to see play out is the Guild's delicate position in the Forbidden Lands. Shortly after arriving in the region, thought to be uninhabited for thousands of years, the Guild discovers that it's anything but. There, people have spent millennia surviving the harsh, cyclical ecology of the Forbidden Lands – and they've done it without the Hunter's Guild's combat tech.

Kaname Fujioka, executive director and art director for *Monster Hunter Wilds*, said that the development team wanted to explore what role the hunters would play in ecologies and societies they're interacting with for the first time. "We want to show what the hunters exactly are in a world like that," Fujioka said. "We feel that the story and the setting is designed to really question and make you think about, 'What is a hunter?'"

In what I played, the best lens for that question is Nata, a boy discovered by the Guild shortly after it had touched down in the Forbidden Lands. Nata's the sole survivor of a village destroyed by Arkveld, the *Wilds* mascot monster and primary subject of the Guild's investigation. By accompanying the Guild, Nata's gone from losing his home to living among people who've trained themselves to face the rampages that threaten villages like his own. From what I've seen, it's left him with a deep sense of doubt, guilt, and powerlessness.

Towards the end of my demo session, Nata joined the hunters on an excursion. In the aftermath of a battle with a new monster, as Nata struggled to keep his composure, one of the veteran hunters tried to ground him by asking him two questions, "Why does a hunter exist? To what end do we carry these weapons?" I'm looking forward to watching *Monster Hunter* find the answer.

Lincoln Carpenter



Congalala's breath weapon is bad. The other end is worse.



I'M EXCITED FOR THE DUAL-WEAPON LOADOUTS AND THE CHANGES TO COMBAT



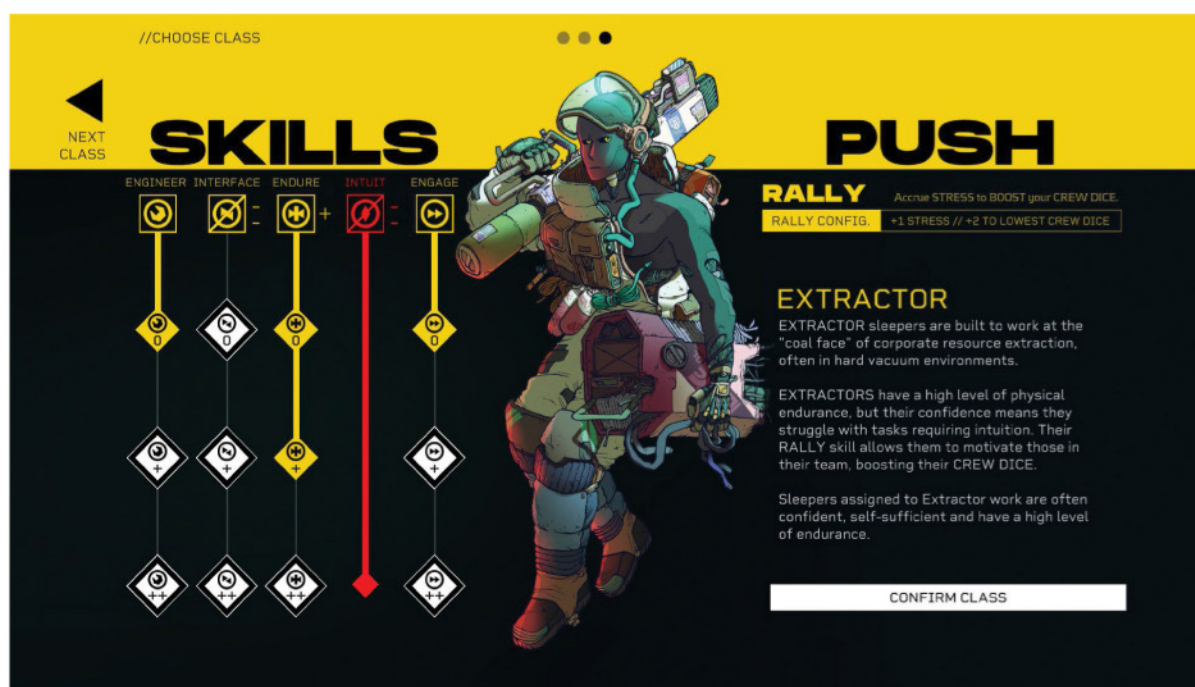
ABOVE: Many offensive armour skills have been moved over to weapons.

LEFT: The Lala Barina, a vampire spider made of knives...



ABOVE: As you might've noticed by the lack of dice, here, this came down to the wire.

RIGHT: Each Sleeper body has its own Push ability to tempt you into tanking more Stress.



Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

January 31, 2025

DEVELOPER

Jump Over the Age

PUBLISHER

Fellow Traveller

LINK

fellowtraveller.games

CITIZEN SLEEPER 2: STARWARD VECTOR

‘On the run’ makes for bitten nails

Citizen Sleeper – the first game – has a very special place in my heart. Its themes mirrored the rhythm of my own life beat-for-heartbeat, as I moved out into the world for the first time: to go somewhere, alone, without any guarantee of safety or happiness, is a terror.

The first game presented a harsh, but idealistic picture of what that experience is like – yes, the forces of the world are fierce and yes, becoming safe is an uphill struggle. Community is difficult to find, and some people don’t make it at all. But it is possible. What was, at first, a difficult resource management game soon became a storybook, as I discovered ways to keep my synthetic Sleeper body running. Soon enough, the place I was stranded on began to feel like home, sweet home.

Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector, from the handful of hours I’ve played, is a complete inversion of that comfort. This is a difficult pill to swallow for me, but not an entirely unwelcome one. The core concept is much the same – you’re a Sleeper, your body is falling apart, and you need to keep pace with a set of resources to survive. But there’s one key difference; you can’t make a home anywhere.

While *Citizen Sleeper* offers you ending points, letting you leave the game to go and find your fortune among the stars,

Citizen Sleeper 2 hoists these ending points upon you. You are being hunted, after all, by Laine. A man who believes he owns you, body and soul. To him, your present freedom is an aberration to be corrected. All your relationships are fleeting, and you can never settle. That’s a fact of life out on the starlit highway.

This is all compounded by the fact that *Citizen Sleeper 2* is far more complex than its prior entry – systems folding in on themselves to maximise your sense of resource-driven dread.

SPINNING PLATES

Citizen Sleeper 2 swaps out the linear bar of Condition for the triple Damoclean swords of Glitch, Stress and broken dice. Stress is built through failing checks or by using your Push ability. Glitch is induced by story events, giving you a chance to roll glitched-out dice which (with my bad luck) are basically a crapshoot. Finally, your dice can straight-up break. As you accrue Stress, each die can take points of damage when it’s rolled – if all of your dice break, you gain a permanent Glitch (or just straight-up die on higher difficulties).

PLAYED IT

Essentially, you’re kept ricocheting around a triplet of risk vs reward decisions, and the entire machine has a higher chance of collapsing the further you push.

Mechanised burnout writ into digital flesh. What’s more, the moment-to-moment tasks are far more fraught than they were in the first game.

Instead of dealing with a couple of doomsday clocks while building yourself a cosy nest, *Citizen Sleeper 2* wants you to go out on contracts. Isolated missions where it’s just you, your crew, and a metaphorical bomb to diffuse in order to get your payday. Contracts are limited by your supplies, and if you run out, you’ll start spiralling, fast.

This one-two punch makes for one nail-biter. You don’t want to push your stress too far, because that’ll have serious consequences later on – but you’re also caged by circumstances. Do you burn the candle at both ends to get the job done, or take the hit to your wallet? It’s all terribly compelling. I just wonder, at this early stage, whether I’ll be able to keep up without burning out, myself.

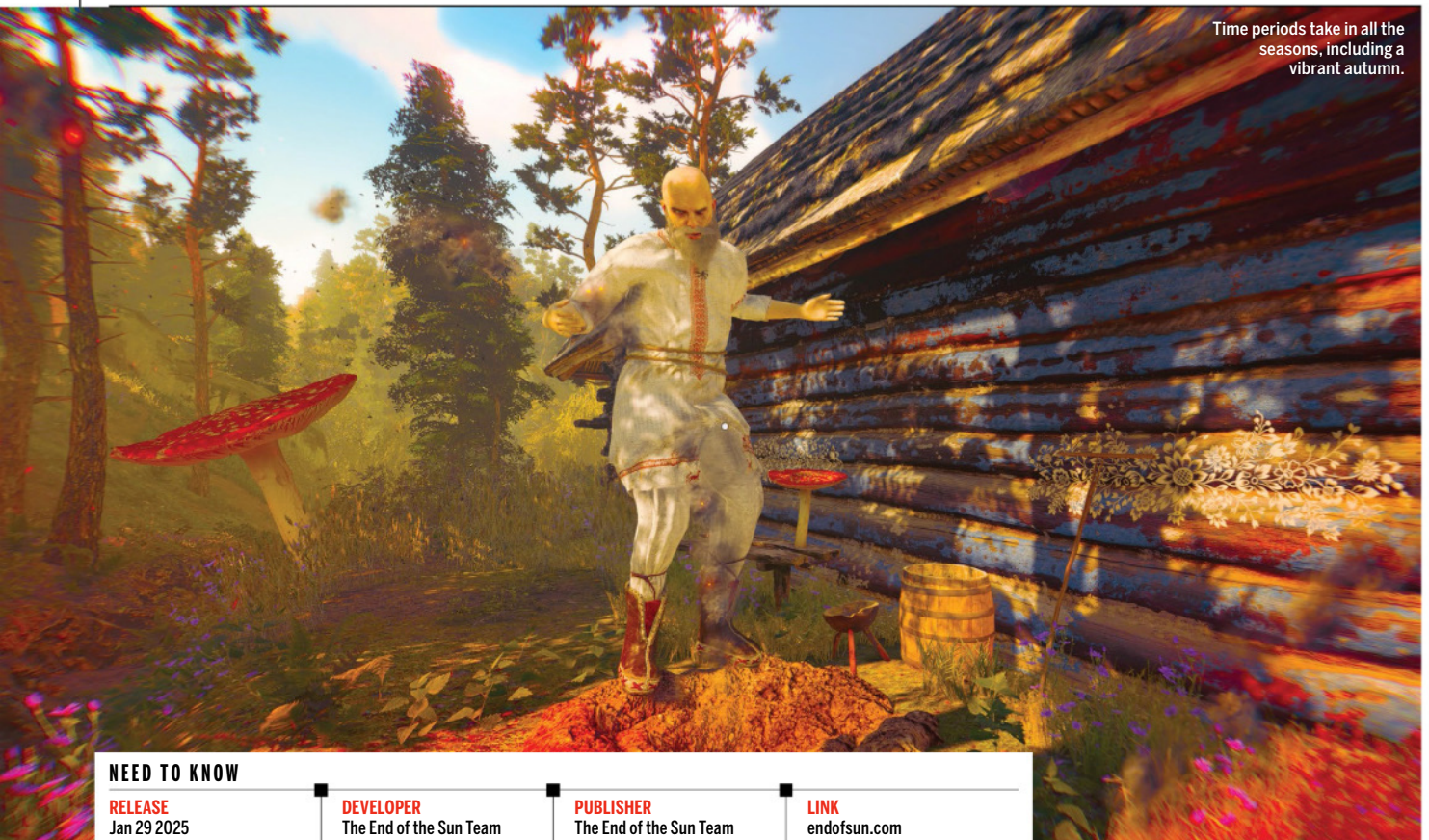
Harvey Randall

SOON ENOUGH, THE PLACE I WAS STRANDED ON BEGAN TO FEEL LIKE HOME, SWEET HOME



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Jan 29 2025

DEVELOPER
The End of the Sun Team

PUBLISHER
The End of the Sun Team

LINK
endofsun.com

THE END OF THE SUN

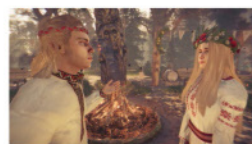
Magical time-travel
fantasy adventures

What's that you say? A first-person exploration and adventure story-driven game, set in the Slavic fantasy world? A blurred line between myth and reality? Time travel? Yes please. Poland-developed *The End of the Sun* ticks a lot of PC gaming boxes in a post-*Witcher 4* announcement world.

PLAYED IT

And while it's easy to see the word 'Poland' and think *Witcher*, the series that first springs to mind when watching *The End of the Sun* is *The Elder Scrolls*, specifically *Oblivion*, with its shimmering bloom lighting, forested national park vibe, and the way the camera zooms into objects of interest. A closer comparison, looking beyond the visuals, might be The Chinese Room's excellent *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, however, with its focus on a single village filled with secrets.

The rural homestead in *The End of the Sun* isn't empty, there's just no one there.



Instead of inhabitants, your character, a sorcerer known as the Ashter, discovers burned out hearths, and is led by trails of smoke and flame to points of interest. Among the Ashter's magical powers is the ability to travel through time, and this is used to visit the village for major Slavic festivals that celebrate the changing seasons. These moments are separated by years rather than months, enabling the game to bring you the stories of its characters across their lives.

POLES APART

And it's the stories that are important. There's a lot of walking simulator on show here, but it's a game about teasing out the story rather than charging about the place. To create the naturalistic look of its

forests and timber buildings, the dev team visited museums and applied photogrammetry techniques, leading to a world with realistic textures and cabbages.

FARMING EQUIPMENT

Upon strolling into the village, which is really little more than two buildings and some subsistence farming equipment, the first story revealed is that of Nadimir, who has woman trouble. Interact with marked points, and his ghost will appear, acting out a brief scene. Not only has he forgotten a gift for a young lady, but he's been trapped in the woodshed by a collapsing pile of logs. By picking up logs in your time, and placing them in the pile to reinforce its structural integrity, you can prevent the collapse in his. A carved figurine you find can be left on a stump so he will find it, and a missing quern stone tracked down so that he can grind flour.

The game's slow pace also seems to have been applied to its development – it's been two years since a demo version first surfaced and the game first appeared on Steam in 2018 – but a release date is finally in sight.

AMONG THE ASHTER'S POWERS IS THE ABILITY TO TRAVEL THROUGH TIME

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Kiln Studios

PUBLISHER
Kiln Studios

LINK
thisdeadwinter.com

THIS DEAD WINTER

Foxy feats in frosty forests

Having featured one game starring a fox only last month (*Spirit of the North 2*) along comes another: *This Dead Winter* features a fluffy red specimen whose home, where a few remaining animals are hidden in a deep valley, is gripped by an enduring winter and whose cub mysteriously disappears.

A third-person adventure, the fox explores the ruined landscape and learns to make use of all the switches, mechanisms and secret knowledge humans have left behind to make her way through areas that aren't as dead as you may believe.

SPIRIT IN THE SKY

There's much more than human artefacts and the mixture of high-technology and stone castle walls they've gifted to the world's new masters to interact with, however. This world is filled with spirits, from giant fish that swim through the sky to two-legged wolves that roam the forest, their heads at treetop height. Some are benevolent, and will aid our foxy protagonist in her quest, while others require more careful handling.

FIRST LOOK

The game world is semi-open, with large expanses to explore along with narrower areas that can be traversed by platforming, your fox using its agility to leap from wall to wall, dashes to break through barriers or spring between pillars, and seemingly teleport between lit beacons. One section in which the fox trots through a crepuscular forest populated by humanoid robots which come alive, a red light activating on each of their faces as power returns to dormant

circuits, is as affecting as it is dramatic. Elsewhere, flags are strung between buildings, tall towers pierce the sky, and shafts of sunlight cut through the gloom of interiors.

This is an indie production from a small team in Manchester, created in the Unreal Engine by a single programmer and Kickstarted into life. The fact it looks so good, especially in motion, is testament to the talent of the people who've put years of work into the game, and any upcoming release date will be anticipated.

The world has a Morrowind vibe, with its magical fungi.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Jan 20, 2025 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Billionworlds

PUBLISHER
Daedalic Entertainment

LINK
s.team/a/1561960

YIELD! FALL OF ROME

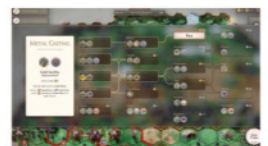
Veni, videogame, vici

Most 4X games have you start from nothing and building an empire that reaches the stars, or at least achieves a cultural victory over your opponents, but *Yield!* does things differently. At the beginning of the game there is a monolithic central power, and you are one of a scrappy bunch of upstarts trying to bring it down.

FIRST LOOK

Now, if you spend much time thinking about the Roman Empire, you'll know this is roughly what happened. It's 401AD, and the peninsula-dwelling pasta-lovers are in decline. The empire is struggling to govern such a vast realm, and around the edges there are opportunities for other powers to nibble chunks out of its lands.

Which of course is exactly what you do. As one of eight playable factions, such as the Huns thundering in from the east or



the Caledonians fomenting rebellion in Britannia, you're scheming to defeat Rome any way you can. It's not that simple, though, as Caesar and co are a pretty entrenched presence on the map, with fortified cities, a competent army, and a navy capable of turning your ships to floating piles of broken wood, so you'll need to build up your forces before taking on the big boys. Then there are the other factions, all of whom are going to be gunning for you, trying to pull themselves up with the strap of your sandals.

ROMANES EUNT DOMUS

As a 4X, *Yield!* naturally takes place on a hex grid, and the developers at BillionWorlds have done nothing to hide this. This has resulted in a chunky look for

the game, with boundaries of influence and range rendered in thick lines of your faction's colour, and your buildings roofed in the same. Catapults and other war machines look almost cute as they move across the map toward their target cities, and as the settlements burst into flames clouds of black smoke rise from their cathedrals and grain silos.

With games such as *Civilization* among its influences, games of *Yield!* could go on for a long time, but the devs have instead chosen to focus on tactics rather than grand strategy, with encounters moving at a fast pace rather than dragging out. The solo campaign will present a string of short-term goals with a major objective in mind that combines the results of your small victories into a giant conquest, while multiplayer comes with ranked and unranked matches, online leaderboards and a play-by-cloud game in which individual turns can take up to 24 hours to play out, allowing for a more relaxed approach akin to chess by email. The fall of the Roman Empire is almost upon us, in Early Access form at least, and this could be an interesting addition to the 4X world.

YOU'LL NEED TO BUILD UP YOUR FORCES BEFORE TAKING ON THE BIG BOYS



ASTROBOTANICA

More chill than an ice age

lovely, sunny graphical style and comes with a relaxed approach to survival. Your three-fingered, blue-skinned, highly educated protagonist requires carbon dioxide to breathe, and so must set up equipment to generate this from the native plant life. There are animals too, along with a newly emerging human population (who you can learn to communicate with), and some are friendlier than others. To tackle marauding creatures you can either hide and avoid them, or brew potions from plants and create clouds of sleeping gas or sticky goo to slow them down. *Astrobotanica* looks like a breezy approach to the survival

FIRST
LOOK

game, and the idea of working with the resources of Pleistocene Earth with its pristine environment is a break from the grimy survival norm.

An alien biologist crashes on Earth 300,000 years ago, and instead of immediately calling in planet-wide destruction or attempting to mate with the primitive inhabitants instead sets about cultivating the soil and making potions.

What sounds like it might be a traumatic experience is rendered in a

Earth was so lovely before modern humans ruined it.



RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Space Goblin Studio

PUBLISHER
Space Goblin Studio

LINK
s.team/a/2720920



FIRST
LOOK

TWO POINT MUSEUM

Make an exhibition of yourself

RELEASE
March 4 2025

DEVELOPER
Two Point Studios

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
s.team/a/2185060

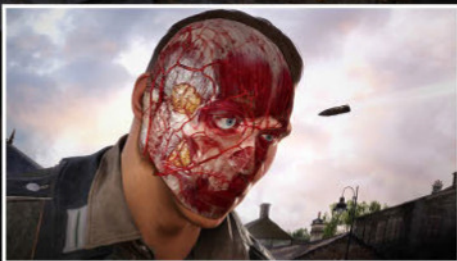
Following the *Hospital* and *Campus*, the *Two Point* formula now takes on history with its usual reverence and

seriousness. The game switches things up from previous games with a change of focus: now, instead of caring for the patients or students,

building the museum itself and making it interesting is the goal, something that looks like an improvement. Museums are cool. No really, they are.

BE THE RESISTANCE

THE AWARD-WINNING SERIES RETURNS WITH NEW LEAD OPERATIVE HARRY HAWKER. JOIN THE FRENCH RESISTANCE TO STOP THE NAZIS DEVELOPING A POWERFUL NEW 'WONDER WEAPON' AND CHANGING THE COURSE OF THE ENTIRE WAR.



X-RAY KILL CAM RETURNS AS BULLETS
DEFLECT OFF BONES RIPPING
UNPREDICTABLE NEW PATHS



EXPERIENCE TOTAL COMBAT
AUTHENTICITY IN JAW-DROPPING
NEW LOCATIONS



SNEAK, SNIPE AND ELIMINATE
ENEMIES IN NEW PROPAGANDA
MISSIONS!

REBELLION



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BLOOD MAGIC

Rebel Wolves has legendary
RPGs in its veins, and
the studio's debut game,
THE BLOOD OF DAWN WALKER,
looks set to take the
genre to new heights

By Robert Jones

The Blood of Dawnwalker

If you were to tell me that the game director of the now legendary single-player open-world dark fantasy action-RPG, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, had decided to leave CD Projekt, establish a new studio, and then create his own original single-player open-world dark fantasy action-RPG, then you'd have my attention. But if you told me he was doing that with a team of passionate, experienced, creatively free developers who, together, were building on that storied legacy by evolving the genre in some genuinely fresh, exciting ways, then you'd find me flying out to Warsaw, Poland, to speak with Konrad Tomaszewicz, along with other key game developers, posthaste. And what I discovered at Rebel Wolves was one the most exciting new virtual worlds in gaming.

EMERGING FROM SHADOW

Let's cut to the quick. *The Blood of Dawnwalker* is the first game in a new series (the *Dawnwalker* saga), and it is a triple-A open-world action-RPG set in medieval Europe but with a supernatural twist – you play as Coen, a half-human, half-vampire being known as the Dawnwalker. This game takes place in our world, but one where myths and legends exist despite the fact that most people don't know about them or believe in them. It is a narrative-focused dark fantasy RPG with third-person perspective camera, Unreal Engine 5 graphics engine, and a world size that is equivalent to games such as *God of War* or *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*.

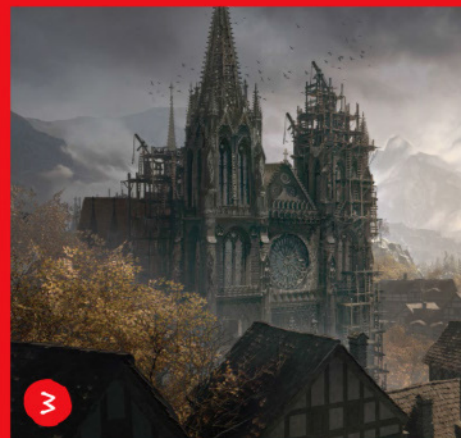
Furthermore, in news that will be like a fresh, blood-filled neck to a vampire for PC gamers, *Dawnwalker* is a 100 percent single-player experience, and one that Rebel Wolves has confirmed does not feature any microtransactions, in-game events, game-as-a-service functionality or NFTs. Praise be! This is a narrative-focused action-RPG rich with cinematic storytelling. The priorities of Rebel Wolves are clear here. The studio wants to invite gamers into a dark fantasy tale that begins in the Carpathian Mountains, in one specific valley to be accurate, the Vale Sangora, where *The Blood of*

Dawnwalker's main character, Coen, lives and, after becoming involved in the game's dramatic opening events, gets turned into the being known as the Dawnwalker, a half-human, half-vampire being with unique powers. In the day, Coen is a human, with all the traditional mortal weaknesses that entails, hence the need for a good sword or two. However, at night Coen transforms into a vampire, and gains access to powerful supernatural abilities, and it is by navigating this duality that *Dawnwalker's* story progresses. As we will see later, though, how this game's narrative plays out, and the consequences it will have on Coen and the Vale Sangora, are completely in the player's hands, with the game boasting two uniquely fresh RPG gameplay mechanics, a 'narrative sandbox' and a quest-determined 'time as a resource' day and night cycle. Before we dig into these mechanics, though, with key insight from game director, Konrad, as well as *Dawnwalker's* creative director Mateusz Tomaszewicz and design director, Daniel Sadowski (both also veterans from CD Projekt's *Witcher* games), let's take a trip into *Dawnwalker's* lore-rich world.

THE VALE SANGORA

Coen lives with his family in the valley of Vale Sangora, which is a rural mountainous area within the Carpathians during medieval times. The story of *The Blood of Dawnwalker* begins, though, with the Vale Sangora being taken over by a group of powerful vampires, who via their acts both turn Coen into the titular Dawnwalker, as well as kidnap his family. So begins Coen's journey to save his loved ones in this remote valley that, thanks to the vampire antagonists destroying the few bridges and passes leading into and out of it, is now cut off from the rest of the medieval world.

The capital city of Vale Sangora is Svartrau, which is nearly one thousand years old at the commencement of the game, a destination which has been designed by Rebel Wolves as a melting pot of various Eastern European cultures including Romanian, Hungarian, Polish, Czech and Slovakian, among others. The Vale Sangora has always been a remote part of Eastern Europe but now it is cut off and forgotten. It wasn't always, though, and thanks to





1

DAWNWALKER IS A NARRATIVE-FOCUSED ACTION-RPG WITH CINEMATIC STORYTELLING



4

1 The capital city of Vale Sangora is Svartrau, which is nearly 1,000 years old at the commencement of the game's story.

2 Beneath the rural dystopian landscape lies remnants of the Vale Sangora's mysterious ancient past.

3 The cathedral in Svartrau, which remains partially under construction following the vampire invasion.

4 A unique design element to *Dawnwalker's* vampires is that, as they age, their razor sharp teeth get progressively longer.



RELIGION

Christianity once thrived in Vale Sangora but, under vampire rule, a new religion based on dark blood offerings has been created, with all humans forced to attend these sacrificial blood masses.

“BOTH ACTION AND INACTION IN DAWNWALKER HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES”

» it being rich in natural resources, and especially precious metals like silver, in more remote centuries before the vampire invasion it was prosperous, with its silver mines in particular being notable. Recently, though, thanks to the decline of its mining industry, as well as a devastating plague and the barbarous rule of the valley's last human leader, Skender Vragosti, unrest and famine has become widespread in the land.

Enter the *The Blood of*

Dawnwalker's antagonist vampire clique, led by master vampire Brencis, who take over the disordered Vale Sangora by force, before then establishing themselves as the new lords of the valley as well as its religion, with its inhabitants forced to attend church each week to pay a sacrificial blood tax to remain living and, so the vampires say, under their protection. It is against this backdrop, as well as the largely hidden ancient history of the Vale Sangora that is

typified by intriguing ruins and buried subterranean complexes, that Coen's story takes place. A narrative that Rebel Wolves wants the gamer to have freedom and agency in via the narrative sandbox approach.

NARRATIVE SANDBOX

“So narrative sandbox refers to the way we craft our content,” notes Mateusz when I ask him about it. “It's how we allow you, the player, to interact with it. So the core of it is

CULTURE

Vale Sangora's culture is an amalgam of Eastern European influences, with its customs, architecture, garments, weapons and industries stemming from the region's medieval history.

LOCATION

Vale Sangora is a remote valley deep within the Carpathian Mountains. Sweeping vistas merge with dense forests, ancient ruins, rustic dwellings, and various wild and domestic animals.

maximising players' agency and freedom of choice, while, at the same time delivering the high-quality narratives that we are known for crafting in the past.

"*Dawnwalker* is not going to be a game where it's a pure sandbox, where you're just focusing on the gameplay. We do want you to experience these moments with the world of the characters, and the emotions that these situations can evoke, and so on, and so forth. But, at

the same time you are looking for ways of maximising freedom as you do." Daniel then adds: "In our game, we want the world to be dynamic. We don't want it to be static, like waiting for the player all the time. So both action and inaction in *Dawnwalker* have serious consequences, and that's also how we structured the quests, so that it can all be showcased while you play the game." Mateusz, expanding on Rebel Wolves' approach here, adds that,

"Narrative sandbox informs not only the main quest – it also informs all the other types of content that we have. We are trying to make tie-ins from these. You know, you might encounter seemingly inconsequential, smaller activities of the world, but we are trying to make them tie into this main narrative. It kind of feels like a synergetic approach where all this content helps each another to be this cohesive whole. It's not like there is the main story, and there are just

The Blood of Dawnwalker

» sidequests that are unrelated to it. All of it kind of overlaps a little bit, if that makes sense.” Finally, Daniel concludes that, with the narrative sandbox approach to storytelling and player agency, *Rebel Wolves* is “trying our best to balance everything out, and there is a lot of cool content that you can interact with. We are trying to tie-in all of that content so that things affect each other in cool ways, and give you a lot of freedom as to what to do next. Sometimes it feels like playing a paper RPG where you can really just go into the world, and pick your adventures. That’s sort of what we are aiming for here with the narrative sandbox as well”.

SUN AND MOON

This approach to player agency and freedom has another dimension under *Rebel Wolves*, too, as not only are all of its quests and player decisions connected in some way or other, but they’re bonded with the game’s day and night cycle, with each quest progressing the game’s clock to some degree. Time is a resource for Coen to use, and with just 30 days to save his family, each decision the player makes, be that during the day as human Coen, or at night as vampire Coen, is going to have an impact on that. To be clear, when Coen is simply exploring Vale Sangora time will not progress, but as Coen completes any quest, no matter how big or small, time will pass.

I ask Konrad for an explanation of *Rebel Wolves*’ thinking behind this conjoining of narrative sandbox with a quest-tied time-as-resource gameplay mechanic. “[Along with] the narrative sandbox, I think, this is the most important thing for me,” he explains, “because, when you put it together, it makes something really unique – this feeling of urgency in the games can be upgraded.

“For example, when you’re playing *The Witcher 3*, and you know that Ciri needs help, but you decide to go play *Gwent* – it’s something which, you know... you feel that it’s a game, and it’s a really good game. But it’s a game. And maybe if you had some resource, and you know that maybe if you don’t go, something would happen – then your thinking about this game would be different, and maybe the immersion would be better, and maybe your emotions would be different.”

Daniel, as design director, adds

that “the time system is a core element of our narrative sandbox. It moves only when you do the content, because we do not want the time system to be there to rush the player or to stress them out. We want the time system to be part of the narrative experience, and part of the whole ‘both action and inaction have consequences’ [approach].

“It will work in interesting ways. It will definitely force you to make choices at some points, like what to do, and what to ignore, because you will also have to choose which content you want to do, and which content you want to ignore, in order to maximise your chances of defeating the main enemy. But you will be able to choose between different ways to approach the problem, and that all ties into the narrative sandbox again.”

It sounds potentially incredible, an interlocking system of content and decisions that is based on a time-limited day and night cycle, with each choice affecting other aspects of the game world in reactive, immersive ways. It reminds me of the deep levels of reactivity shown off in Larian Studios’ masterpiece, *Baldur’s Gate III*, but with an added time-as-a-resource mechanic thrown on top, where you can only complete a certain number of quests in a specific time period. But, while it sounds potentially remarkable, it also sounds like an incredible challenge to balance for the player. I ask Mateusz, the creative director, about how he and the team are approaching that.

“It’s something that we are still working on, and we’ll be doing a ton of playtesting, I’m sure, and modifying as we go,” he says. “Because it’s not a finished game, it’s difficult to answer it fully. We have a lot of QA, and we can track how they usually play the game. But of course they’re a bit biased because they play the game continuously. So at some point you do playtesting with people who don’t know the game that well, and you do a lot of telemetry. You check which paths did they take most often? There is a certain amount of average data you can get [and] in most cases, it is pretty accurate.

“For example, looking back at *The Witcher 3*, we had this situation in Velen where when you’re starting the game we noticed that most people





“IT GIVES YOU THIS FEELING THAT THIS GAME IS SO FULL OF POSSIBILITIES AND DIFFERENT WAYS TO PLAY”



1 Time is a resource in *Dawnwalker*, with each quest completed progressing the in-game clock.

2 However, while simply exploring the game's virtual world, time does not pass. Time anxiety is not a thing here.

3 During the day Coen, the game's protagonist, is human. But at night he is a vampire, with supernatural abilities.

4 The rustic interior of a bedroom from a dwelling in Vale Sangora. Most inhabitants of the valley are now poor.

1

"I SET UP REBEL WOLVES
BECAUSE I FELT THAT I
WANTED TO MAKE SOMETHING
UNIQUE WITH MY FRIENDS"



1 The partially ruined interior of a library, showing off Eastern European elements and the game's grimdark vibe.

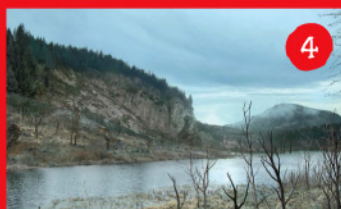
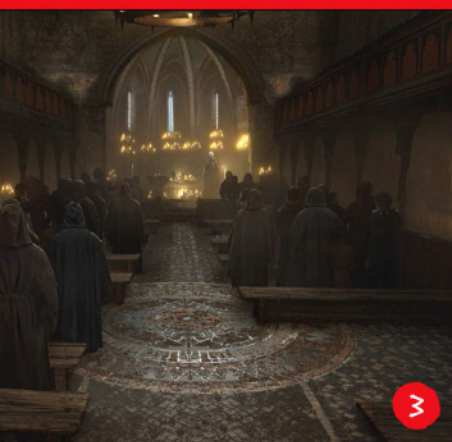
2 Concept art for one of the antagonist vampires who have taken over the Vale Sangora. Note the long teeth.

3 Humans attending a blood mass. The ruling vampires act as the Vale Sangora's new deities, and demand blood tribute.

4 Despite the dire state of the valley's human population, Vale Sangora remains a naturally beautiful location.

2





take a very specific path. We felt like, 'OK, this is the first hour of experience. Let's move some things around, so that these first few hours will be even better'. We made sure you get all the cool stuff from the start. So this is how you usually do it. You gather data. You track it. You modify content based on it. You won't be able to cover every possible permutation. But I think it's also the beauty of it, because it creates these cool user experiences that we did not predict, actually. I think this is what is great about it, because this is what creates these conversations between people. It also gives you this feeling that this game is so full of possibilities and different ways to play it. So it also boosts replayability."

Daniel then adds, "We really want every player to have a different experience – a unique experience – with the game and with the story. That's why we were crafting all this content to fill the whole game's world with many interesting quests, and many interesting side stories to discover, and many secrets to uncover as well. I personally think that it's going to be really fun to see what will be the content that a very small percentage of players will uncover. What combination of choices will lead to this very unique outcome that only a couple of players will see? I love reading about that stuff, personally, from other games, so I think it's going to be really fun to see in our game as well."

LEADER OF THE PACK

So why Rebel Wolves, and why *Dawnwalker*? After learning that Konrad's favourite games include *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Ultima VII*, I get a candid response from Rebel Wolves' founder.

"I set up Rebel Wolves because I felt that I wanted to make something that is unique with my friends," says Tomaszewicz. "Of course, we have a huge love of RPG games, and what has been done before in the past. I feel that those things, those rules of RPG games, can be expanded and evolved. We had crazy ideas. We knew that, you know, if we wanted to make them, we needed to open our own studio, because it would be hard to convince any big company – you know, with non-IP – to change, and do something new, and do something crazy. Actually, it's risky, because we're doing some solutions which are

new. And the second thing is that we will have a studio where we work with the people, and among them, not like at the bigger studios where it's harder. I felt that a smaller team is capable of doing more, because the communication inside the team, and it's easier to speak about the vision. It's easier to feel the creative fire, and to do something special."

But what about Rebel Wolves' debut intellectual property, which the team hopes will become a multi-game *Dawnwalker* saga?

"I felt that I wanted to do a game which would not be a game about, like, a normal, let's say superhero, which we know from Marvel movies and so on and so on. It's hard to do those stories because you are [just] stronger and stronger and stronger. I searched for an idea for the hero, which would be near the ground – or grounded – and needed to solve things in a different way. But, also, I wanted to give some kind of superhero to the players. That's why I designed a protagonist who, in the day, is a human, with all the weaknesses of a human being. [However], at night, you are a vampire, which is stronger and faster, and you have better abilities and supernatural skills. It's somehow interesting, this duality of the hero, which we know from Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, for example. It's something in pop culture that is well-known and wasn't yet explored in games. It gives you a different layer to those non-realities, and I think it would be quite interesting because nobody yet has done that. And we will see how people will like it."

And, from what I've seen so far, I've got more than sneaking suspicion that gamers, and specifically PC gamers who have a ravenous desire for mature, freedom-filled and thought-provoking gaming experiences, are going to more than just like *The Blood of Dawnwalker*. For me, right now this looks like a engrossingly dark and complex action RPG that is not just building on all-time greats of the genre like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, but is actively looking to bring something new to the table. And, honestly, after meeting the Rebel Wolves themselves and hearing about their inspirations, passions and collective vision for this exciting new action-RPG, I feel this new studio is going to deliver something truly special. ■

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LOVE'S LABOURS LIBRARY

PART 2

Building a library with
BALDUR'S GATE III's
foremost librarian

Emma Withington

Baldur's Gate III



Obsidian calmly sifts through books in her new library, while Warren and Karlach unceremoniously

chunk corpses out onto the street in broad daylight and Gale tries to use the Create Water spell to remove the bloodstains. In fairness, the corpses had no business being there and were merely an obstruction.

How did I get here? Well, dear reader, we last saw Obsidian and Warren in the Blighted Village (and in issue 398) – unaware of the corpse-strewn future ahead of them. Though, they probably should have expected it, all things considered.

Obsidian's skills escalated to a terrifying degree in her pursuit for books, her sharpened silver tongue slicing through the Shadow-Cursed Lands. She talked every major enemy to death, barring Balthazar, Ketheric Thorm, and the legendary Myrkul. Spider lad and Absolute fanatic Kar'niss voluntarily walked into the shadows, and the corrupted vestiges of the Thorm family were finally laid to rest. Thisobald Thorm drank himself to combustion while Obsidian weaved tales of devils, golems and derring do; Tollkeeper Gerringothe Thorm exploded into a pile of gold, as Obsidian triumphantly

announced “and that’s how you get out of taxes”; Later, House of Healing ‘surgeon’, Malus Thorm, ‘tripped and fell’ on his own scalpel.

Raphael's enemy, Yurgir, didn't stand a chance against madam ‘well actually’, as she barrelled through – she'd clearly spent too much time with Gale. Armed with knowledge about devilish contracts, she found a ‘loophole’ which meant he must kill his followers, his displacer beast, and himself to be free. Her bond with Gale had also grown. Gale had the sense to seduce Obsidian with a

simulacrum of his tower “enlivened by the spines of a thousand books” – she often wondered if it was the books or the man she was drawn to in this moment – and they engaged in the strangest act of coitus known to man, thanks to a book called The Art of the Night. Basically, wizard Kama Sutra. The book transported them

to the Astral Plane, and there were suddenly three of him, one of her – and that made it Gale O'clock.

As for Warren, she had continued along her heroic path by helping small children, tieflings, and befriending the legendary Jaheira. She was staunchly committed to Halsin's cause since becoming the hero of the Grove and working to find a cure for the shadow-cursed lands. Upon our first night in the outskirts of Baldur's Gate, we were set upon by portal-hopping githyanki and came face to face with our

THE RULES

1. Do whatever it takes to procure books.

2. Avoid heroics, unless books are involved.

3. Use conversational wizardry and make low-stakes choices to stay out of trouble.



BELOW: Local book club enjoys the lewd and crude, who'd have thunk it?

‘helpful’ dream visitor, The Emperor. A mind flayer who tells us he used to be an adventurer, until he took an illithid to the knee or something. Sadly, Warren was unable to save herself from becoming part illithid and as a result is a touch more unpredictable, while developing impressive strength. Her spirit altered and in that moment, she expressed great sadness: “I am no longer at balance with the world.” Either way, she remains helpful for punching through walls and wooden barricades like they're nothing for the sake of the library.

HOLISTIC DETECTIVE

The housing market in Baldur's Gate is truly dire, so I needed a way of narrowing down Obsidian's Library search in the Lower City. Following our instincts, we headed to The Circus of the Last Days. Approaching ‘security’, Warren was more impressed with Klaus' outfit than Obsidian bypassing the sniffer-ghoul by saying that she was a fire breather. Moving through the circus, we



CAUSING A RECORD-BREAKING RUCKUS TO ACQUIRE BOOKS



entered the Open Hand Temple via the back entrance. Here, we found a bounteous amount of Ilmatari books, a flying elephant 'detective', and the trail of murder: Valeria, AKA Elephant-Holmes, was not at all interested in digging deeper into the murder of High Priest Father Lorgan, choosing to go with the 'politically convenient' conclusion that he was killed by a refugee, who then, in turn

killed himself. Sister Yannis smelled a rat and was insisting someone investigate further.

After causing a record-breaking ruckus to acquire books from the main hall – which involved Obsidian getting everyone in trouble on numerous occasions, due to using invisibility with visible pals in tow – they began looking into the murder. Throughout the investigation,

ABOVE: Cool librarians don't look at explosions.

Warren remained unamused about having to pay off one keen-eyed clergyman for *SOUPS OF THE REALMS BY BROTHER DONNICK*. Obsidian quoted the recipe book, "Listen, 'Sometimes you've got nice bread, and nothing's better than dipped bread.' I thought you loved cooking at camp?" Warren continued to make disapproving remarks while we followed a blood trail into the cellar, defeated some doppelgängers, and picked through entrails to find the murder weapon, plus a flowery key and a clown's torso amid a display of blood and corpses.

Obsidian wasn't sure how far she wanted to pursue this, as suspicions of Bhaal cultist involvement arose, but for now she had to steel herself and press on. We reported back to Sister Yannis who told us to share our findings with Valeria in Sharness' Caress. Before moving on, we attended a performance by the renowned Dribbles the Clown – who features in *Officially Unofficial Circus History* for taking the spotlight from Dumpy Dumpling, whose firework

TOME TRAVEL #2

Further reading from Obsidian's Library



CHEESE WHIZZ

Becoming a 'Cheezard' is "no laughing matter" explains Mistress Brie Kurdstreiner in *The Book of Cheesomancy*. Learn how to bludgeon your foes with a cheese wheel or inflict the Blue Cheese Sweat – a lactose intolerant nightmare.



CULT OF PERSONALITY

"Neck-deep in bullshit? A shit buffet – an excrement parade – a crapstorm of meaninglessness?" The *Easy Life* suggests a 'conformity defying' cult might be the answer. In this community decisions like "who to befriend" are made for you.



PLEASURE'S PAIN

A Pleasurable Deal follows a man who strikes a deal with a cambion for a "mighty horn and mast" to reclaim his wife – spoiler: it's not a ship. An interview reveals the author sold his soul for the "erotic play" after unsuccessful publishing attempts.



PUTRID POETRY

Obsidian required a constitution saving throw to read *Theskan Anthology of Goblin Poetry* in the Goblin Camp. It's full of putrid prose like, "I gave 'im the biggest kick to the nadgers" but the goblins were unexpectedly protective of it.

THEY DEVOLVED INTO TEENAGE GLEE AND IRREVERENCE



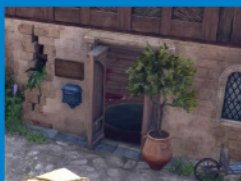
✧ farts no longer cut it. We also suspected something else was afoot, considering the torso we'd found. After sending Gale to the stage as bait, Dribbles set Buddy the 'dog' on Obsidian's paramour, revealing this Dribbles to be an imposter. Sorry.

Ringmistress, Madam Lucretious, mentioned how corpses can be "wonderful employees" and is perfectly fine with reanimating Dribbles from his body parts if we find them. This gave Obsidian the seed of an idea. She would need staff that would work for free until she had the means to pay living assistants. She possessed Necromancy of Thay, which she'd acquired back in the Blighted Village with surprising ease, but had yet to reveal all of its secrets. In the meantime, tracking down some murder victims and clown bits could help her find a suitable, vacant plot.

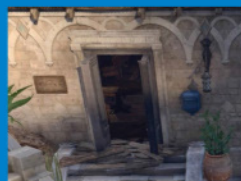
Obsidian shifted uncomfortably as she entered Sharess' Caress; pleasure houses aren't something Dragonborns are accustomed to. She approached the reception desk, but

FRIGHTMOVE

Baldur's Gate real estate listings



RAINFOREST'S HOME
Spacious, part-furnished lodgings. Just the one corpse, and a rat with a taste for human meat.



PEATREE'S HOME
Small, cosy bachelor pad. Stunning green ritual fire in the cellar, a few corpses and bloody markings.



BARREN'S COOP
Cosy cottage, original stone fireplace. Former resident evicted due to anti-hag experiments.



LAVERNICA'S HOME
Fulfil your role as Bloomridge Park's groundskeeper. Situated atop ritualistic 'art'. Giant spiders yet to be removed.

only after ordering the stiffest drink in Faerûn from Hoots, the barkeep. Mamzell Amira immediately attempted to discern Obsidian's kinks and she brushed her assumptions off with ease. But Amira followed up with another proposition. "Your eyes tell a story, sweetie. You crave more than pleasure – you crave penance. It's Ffion you seek – our 'Stern Librarian.'" Obsidian suddenly felt hot under the collar. Her curiosity grew, but Ffion had gone missing, so Obsidian generously offered to help – hungrily pocketing the key to Elminster's Library. She wasn't lusting over the stout librarian, she was thinking about books – while tentatively curious about the Stern Librarian's... 'process'. Opening the door to Ffion's 'pleasure library', Obsidian got down to her usual business, while Warren behaved like a kid in a toy shop – navigating questionable apparatus, ransacking the wardrobes, and pulling out all kinds of leather garb. Obsidian casually read the salacious Rules of the Reading Room, glancing over at



Gale who was awkwardly standing in silence and avoiding her gaze – she surreptitiously pocketed the note, for academic purposes of course. In between reading *The Butler's Cane* has a Knob on the End – a raunchy comedy about a stoic Dragonborn butler called Vincent Raspington who “ends up going arse-over-teakettle into extremely erotic situations with the local nobility” – Obsidian wondered what had become of their merry little band, as they devolved into teenage glee and irreverence.

Ffion's Journal referenced the Flophouse, where we discovered that her murder was connected to the Open Hand Temple case and the dismemberment of Dribbles; a bloodstained note listing murder targets confirmed that it was indeed part of a much bigger Bhaal plot. We finally had some concrete leads for the library. Looking at the list, the residences of the deceased were prime contenders. Or, so we thought. Upon sharing the evidence with Valeria, she referred us to Gauntlet Devella at the Elfsong Tavern.

ABOVE: Using make-up to cover Warren's illithid features wasn't very inconspicuous.

EMPTY HOUSE

After sourcing accommodation in the Elfsong and telling Devella that we didn't fancy playing Miss Marple any longer, it was time for library hunting – using the information we'd gleaned from the investigation. Normally when you decide to buy a house or property for a business venture there are issues you expect to come up against. Mould, dodgy neighbours, cracks in the paintwork, that sort of thing. In Baldur's Gate, however, these are the least of your worries.

Structurally unsound, corpses, bloodied walls, ritualistic murder sites, more corpses and too few bookshelves were among the primary issues we faced. To top it all off, as we approached the seemingly unoccupied Crimson Draughts it was obliterated in an almighty explosion that the locals paid no mind to. Turns out Warren had donated blood to the occupant, Araj Oblodra, back in Moonrise Towers to protect Astarion and her proximity had caused the, now extensive, property damage. Another one bites the dust.

Residences of remaining murder targets were out of the question, as they were established businesses. However, Warren wanted to warn some of them so we swung by to see Cora Highberry who was hosting a wine festival. We prevented her demise, but as we explored her spacious home it had clear potential. Though maybe as a 'book bar', rather than a library – there were far more wine racks than bookshelves. Obsidian expressed frustration that the building was occupied and that

she couldn't even snag a book on one of the tables. Warren did a frighteningly quick 180 on our previous heroism. “It's just four people,” said Warren matter of factly. Obsidian, in a heightened whisper, responded, “But we just prevented their murder? When did I become the rational one?!” Warren remained unfazed. “But you want the books? They were going to die anyway.” “Well... yes? I suppose,” Obsidian agreed hesitantly. “If the book helps us defeat the Absolute and get you your library then we'll do what is necessary,” Warren said with heroic vigour, placing her hands on her hips. Obsidian considered this for a moment, remembering that this had helped Warren get on board with some of her more... outlandish acquisitions. But she had to be honest here. “Warren... the book is about wine. We can come back later.”

The most tantalising option was Philgrave's Mansion. Full of gothic charm, it has at least 12 bookshelves with space for 980 books across the main floors, breathtaking sea views, and a fast travel point nearby. The problem is it comes at a price – evicting the Mystic Carrion, and his living dead pals. Oh, and there's a room filled to the brim with bodies due to necromantic activity that will need to be incinerated and permanently bolted shut.

Carrion mentioned requiring help to find his assistant Thrumbo, who, seeing as he's fled, might help us determine if we can easily evict Carrion. He also provides spirit medium services to the wealthy and



Mystic Carrion: There is a place, 'Sorrowful Sundries'. It is the closest to a necromantic emporium this city has to offer.

» sneered at Obsidian, assuming she couldn't afford such things. So of course we forked over all our savings to prove him wrong, as the spirits had information on unlocking the final chapters of Necromancy of Thay. For Obsidian's 'staff starter pack', we'd need to find the Tharchiate Codex in Sorcerous Sundries, a location Gale and Obsidian had been itching to go book shopping in.

LOST WORDS

Rolan stood behind the desk in Sorcerous Sundries, his beaten face and withered confidence suggesting that the introduction to Lorroakan he'd promised was off the cards. Regardless, speaking to Tolna Tome-Monger was the main port of call. If you thought books elicited strange, erratic behaviour from Obsidian, she had nothing on this archivist. Obsidian didn't like being told how books should be handled in harsh whispers – in a librarian-off, Obsidian knew she would win. Tolna explained that the vaults contained legendary tomes: Caution Before the Seelie, The Red Knight's Final Stratagem, Tharchiate Codex and The Annals of Karsus: A Netherese Folly. Gale's eyes shifted as he said "That's it. That's what I need," with the fervour of an addict. Acting the part of a disappointed, entitled customer, Obsidian said how it was a right shame she couldn't view the books after "coming all the way from Neverwinter to see them". The indignant Tolna revealed that the only way to the vault is through her office and that we aren't allowed

there either. Oh, no. Well, I guess we'll be off then. Obsidian summoned Warren and they went straight upstairs, broke into the office, and walked through a portal into the bowels of the tower.

The Red Knight's Final Stratagem and Caution Before the Seelie were simple enough to obtain, both behind trick walls and integral in cementing Obsidian's Library as the greatest in Baldur's Gate. The main challenge was up ahead through the door on the other side of the room. There were three doors named after "dusty wizards" – as Astarion put it – Elminster, Silverhand and Karsus. A note we'd found, The Path to Karsus, contained hints to the order of doors to pass through – starting with Silverhand. Cautiously stepping through each door, following the note's hints, Obsidian had learned from past escapades to stand still until Warren and Astarion, the bomb disposal team, had made the room safe. Upon acquiring The Annals of Karsus, it revealed that Gale's orb was a part of Karsus' destructive power, but Gale obsessed over reforging the Crown of Karsus as the solution. Obsidian talked him down; the last thing Gale needed was a god complex.

Reaching Elminster's vault required some educated guesswork, but Obsidian soon had the Tharchiate Codex in her grasp. The irony wasn't lost on her as she'd just tried to dissuade Gale from using a dangerous book, but she knew what she was doing. Just some light necromancy. She could now cast Danse Macabre and summon four sprightly ghouls.

FLURRIES OF FISTS AND MISPLACED FIRE SPELLS



BELOW: Behold: the magic whoopee cushion.

LAST WISH

Armed with the information she needed, design inspiration from Lorroakan's book throne, and encumbered by books for the umpteenth time, it was time to claim her library. After a wild ghoulish chase through the graveyard and across a sahuagin-infested beach, we found Thrumbo hiding in a cupboard. He told us Mystic Carrion had been a very naughty boy – not only was he fleecing citizens, but he'd been keeping himself immortal with the use of funerary jars to split up his life essence. After a quick trip to the mortuary and plugging our noses when going subterranean to find his ancient lair, Funerary Jar Form and Function revealed his heart was inside an undead. Hearing this news, Thrumbo dislodged the heart from himself violently in putrid bile.

Armed with Mystic Carrion's four funerary jars, Obsidian thought it would be apt to smash them on one of the exterior walls, christening her new home as you would a ship before its maiden voyage. Though rather





than champagne, we had putrid entrails. “Mine now!” Obsidian cried out as she yeeted the first jar at the wall. Rather than breaking, the jar inexplicably stuck to the wall. Obsidian continued to throw the rest into a rather fetching diamond-shaped pattern, before blasting them to smithereens with a fireball. We steeled ourselves and entered the soon-to-be library, prepared to wipe out the undead occupants. Obsidian summoned her undead boyband who

tore through the opposing forces. In flurries of fists, flashes of lightning and some misplaced fire spells – Carrion and his ghouls were no more. Thrumbo thanked us, but her heart sank as he moved in with his stinky mates. Obsidian felt guilty for what she was about to suggest to Warren. She didn’t have time to agonise over it, as Warren readied her fists. “Look, he’s dead, he’s had his time. He’s living a half life. You need a library and they’re stinking up the

ABOVE: What is Love? Baby don’t burn me.

books – I’m punching him.” After that, it was time for a clean-up.

Now you’re all caught up! Karlach’s under Warren’s instruction, punting all of the bodies outside and rearranging furniture, Gale’s cleaning, and Obsidian’s cataloguing more than 445 books – only looking up to point to pools of blood or bits of furniture to clean or move. Warren went off for a spot of ‘shopping’ to see if she could bring back any furnishings to spruce up the place (AKA ransacking the Elfsong rooms and some of the empty houses). In almost no time at all, she had created a rather homely reception desk. Obsidian looked over the desk at numerous treasures from their adventures and her eyes flashed. “Alright, which one of you bastards put The Realm According to Bumpo here?”

If you’re looking to start your own library, it’s not a simple affair. It’s a book-eat-book world out there, and you’ll need some companions, a strong stomach and four sprightly ghouls to see you through. ■

WARREN LLEWELLYN-BOWEN

Joy-bringing library decor



POOR YORICK

On the trail to Necromancy of Thay, Warren adopted a skull named Friend which never left her side. Obsidian’s certain she occasionally saw Warren tell stories to it.



FROGGY TEAPOTS

Auntie Ethel’s lair may not have been the most fruitful for books, but it sparked Warren’s obsession with “froggy teapots”. She parted with two from her collection for the library.



FISHY DECALS

After Obsidian accidentally convinced some fish people of her godhood, Warren inexplicably bestowed upon her a “starfish gift”. Looks great stuck to the side of a table.



TINY TREASURES

One of Obsidian’s favourite possessions, this ‘toy chest’ spawned after setting off a trio of mimics – a situation she and Gale had under control before Warren arrived.

SNUG LIFE



Cosy games have escaped
the farm to become a huge-selling
genre of their own

By Ian Evenden





The phenomenon of cosy gaming really took off during 2020-22, but the idea of following daily routines, making connections with nature and in-game characters, or games that offer their players lower amounts of stress than *Elden Ring*, has been around for a lot longer.

You could go back to 1996, which was a pretty good year all round, but specifically saw the launch of *Harvest Moon* on the SNES. Known as *Farm Story* in Japan, and now the first game in a series called *Story of Seasons*, this series of farming life-sims has expanded beyond Nintendo's consoles to PlayStation, Xboxes and PCs. In the *Seasons* games, you restore an old farm, grow crops, tend livestock, meet townsfolk and maybe even marry.

And if you've played a certain 2016 life-sim, that will all sound very familiar. *Stardew Valley* is a sensation, a game still getting updates and selling new copies – it was up to 41 million in sales by the end of 2024, 26m of them on PC, which means it beats *Diablo III* and *The Witcher 3* – nine years after launch, and which has seen a revival in games with similar mechanics. While creator Eric Barone has never made a secret of the games that inspired Pelican Town, his game's influence on those that came after can't be denied.

There is a lot more to cosy gaming than farming sims that allow you to date NPC villagers. And as a subgenre – the boundaries between games are as grey and porous as to barely exist at all – it's gloriously broad. More of a vibe than a set of guidelines, all it takes for a game to be cosy is whether you can imagine yourself playing it by a fire on a winter's day, or if it makes you feel like you are, even in the midst of summer.

STRESS RELIEVER

Many cosy games offer gameplay without stress, but that doesn't mean there's no challenge or even no



THERE IS A LOT MORE TO COSY GAMING THAN FARMING SIMS



TOP: *A Short Hike* from Adamgryu gives you an island to explore filled with childhood friends.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Animal Crossing's New Horizons* installment released for Switch in 2020, just in time for the pandemic lockdown months.

combat, though it is often optional. *Stardew Valley* and other life sims operate within a strict time limit for each day – get caught out of bed at 2am and you'll pass out with a bill for medical expenses – and their worlds change with the seasons, but puzzle games without timers pushing you towards failure can be cosy too, especially if their art leans into it.

"The concept really lent itself to making a sort of gentle puzzle game," says Lukas Steinman, one half of *A Little to the Left* developer Max Inferno. "As we've gotten a bit older here, we've had a lot less time to sit down in game and we've often found ourselves gravitating towards gentler experiences. Games that are very permissive in



ABOVE: *Stardew Valley* was many PC gamers' gateway into the world of cosy games, and remains a classic.

their progression, and that have a lot of surprises around each corner. Kind of a strong 'I want to see what comes next' kind of mentality."

For Steinman, timing was also essential in choosing to make a cosy game, "It also came about at the start of the pandemic. So the game itself kind of touches lightly on some of the anxieties that we were feeling at the time. And so making kind of a gentler game just was really kind of therapeutic for us as well."

Steinman's partner in art Annie Macmillan gives some insight into the process behind creating the game. "We were prompted by a game jam theme, and that's sort of how the seed of the game originated," she says. "But we made decisions throughout the process to make it easier for the player, less frustrating, trying to ease tension points wherever we could. And I think that you don't need something that's frustrating for it to be fun or

interesting. I think that quiet and contemplative can draw you in, and be a really nice place to linger."

A Little to the Left contains a feature that elevates it in the echelons of cosiness – the ability to just quit a puzzle and move onto the next one, 'Let it Be' in the game's parlance. It's significant because it removes a common frustration from playing, the feeling of being blocked, of not being able to progress, because you haven't made the particular mental leap required of you. Players of graphic adventures will be familiar with the feeling, the solution often being to use every inventory item on every interactive surface to see what it does and stumble onto the solution. Ron Gilbert, in *Monkey Island 2*, created a puzzle using US-centric wordplay that has wrenched many players into spasms of annoyance, and where a 'Let it Be' button would have saved much hair from being torn out. Even the choice of language, recalling the Beatles and with a pleasingly gentle-sounding cadence, offers a message: there's no shame in moving on, don't stress.

"Let it be came from a memorial I went to," says Macmillan. "A friend of mine passed, and one thing that she'd

ANATOMY OF A COSY GAME

Essential ingredients



TIMETABLE

A regular heartbeat to the game, like getting to bed or a shop opening, gives it a comforting rhythm.



GROWING

Plant seeds, raise animals, watch them grow over time and harvest their products, then craft from them.



GATHERING

Explore the world, see what's laying around. Take it home. Don't worry about stealing, more will spawn tomorrow.



COMBAT

Optional, but this videogame staple has a place in cosy games. Can speed up gathering, or just make you feel good.



FRIENDSHIP

Give NPCs gifts, and watch the number of hearts go up. Friends will give you extra dialogue, options, and even marry you.



FRIENDS

With their large heads and anime eyes, the coffee-seekers who frequent the Critter Café are just begging to be spoken to and befriended. Maybe you can take things further.

CRITTERS

It wouldn't be a Critter Café without critters, and the *Pokémon*-likes that exist in this world don't disappoint. Unlike in *PalWorld*, they don't come with guns.

➤ said on her deathbed was, 'Let what is be.' I wasn't there, but that was what was passed along during her memorial, that she had said that. I thought that was really beautiful, and I was just reflecting on this game that we were making. I just kept worrying it was really uptight and, like, didactic, like we were telling [you] that there's one way to do things. And that was really stressing me out. I love the idea that there's multiple ways to be, multiple perspectives, and that's a beautiful thing about the world. There's more than one way to approach something and see things. It just is more fun, and I always thought it was funny that you could skip the whole game if you want."

THEME PARK

The idea that games can be made out of ideas you find beautiful, rather than ones that are exciting, or that you think will sell well, is an important thread within cosy games. Another common theme is building and creation, whether that's a farm, a series of friendships and deeper

relationships, or a business. Running a shop or restaurant in a cosy game isn't the same as it is in *Overcooked* or *Tapper*, which use time pressure and the threat of angry customers to stress the player and try to force errors, but a more relaxing experience. See the cat café players can operate in animal-riding RPG *Calico*, which shrinks the player character down to the same size as the ingredients they're using while putting together a recipe, turning the

simple act of making a cake into a platform game. Or *Good Pizza, Great Pizza*, which has you upgrade your shop decorations, cooking equipment and toppings as you take on five rival chefs to see who can make the best pepperoni-topped Italian treat.

Critter Café, which appears to have been made in a deliberate attempt to make lovers of cosy games explode into a cloud of sparkly kittens thanks to an overdose of cuteness, combines these ideas. In it,

COSINESS INTENSIFIES

Games to watch in 2025



TINY BOOKSHOP

A management game that taps into the dream we've all had of packing it all in and opening a bookshop by the sea.



OUT AND ABOUT

A foraging adventure that incorporates cosy game staples such as cooking, crafting, and harmony with nature.



KITORI ACADEMY

Wizard's apprentice life-sim with a school timetable to provide that all-important cosy game structure. Also talking frogs.



HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER

Little is known, except it looks a lot like *Stardew Valley* in style and will be very cosy.



VIBES

Just look at this place. The Critter Café has a retro style, is filled with customers who have fashionable haircuts, and is full of cakes. What's not to like?

England's Sumo Newcastle at the beginning of 2020 – a perfect piece of timing for anyone attempting to correlate the rise of cosy gaming with the pandemic. *Critter Café* came out of a game jam in 2022, and Gregory tells us a bit about how it was made.

"I ended up pitching and making a small prototype for *Critter Café* and that was the idea that got a lot of love and support from the studio and the people judging the game jam," she says. "It became a full project towards the end of that year. And over the time of its development, I've been both a gameplay programmer – doing some of

the code for it – and also having a hand in promoting the game and working with a lot of the design at the beginning, fleshing out my original small thing into a full-scale project. I'm a big fan of wholesome games in general, so I kind of just

TURNING THE SIMPLE ACT OF MAKING A CAKE INTO A PLATFORM GAME

STYLE IT OUT

For Gregory, the cosy games genre benefits from containing a wide range of styles, as long as they have one thing in common, "I think it's a genre that does kind of have quite a broad definition to it," she says. "I describe mine as low-stakes escapism, but I'm sure there are some games out there that don't look as cute and cuddly that you could also say are low-stakes escapism. It

probably varies a little person to person within that genre, like, I know some people find it very relaxing playing the factory games where you set up insane production

lines, that kind of thing."

The original *Harvest Moon* seems to have been a team effort, with two directors, a producer, artist and composer on board at developer Amccus, and *Disney Dreamlight Valley*, which combines cosy game systems with familiar characters, came out of bustling Gameloft Montreal, but there's a distinct tendency for cosy games to be indie productions, created by small teams or even individuals. It's unlikely that a lack of stress in the game is mirrored by a lack of stress in development, but the lack of corporate interference, and the purity of vision that comes from a singular driving force, may have something to do with creating the cosy vibe.

Certainly, this newcomer on the established genre scene is here to stay, and might even lead to the classification of new types of game by the way they make you feel rather than what happens or how you play them. *Assassin's Creed* as a travel experience – something possible in its Discovery Tour mode – or an isometric fantasy farming simulator in which you grow the herbs needed by elves to make magic potions.

Whatever the future holds, PC gaming is broad enough to take all types (as a look at the 'all upcoming games' page of Steam will tell you) and the regular injections of gentleness and smiles, stress relief and companionship, that cosy games bring lead to broader audiences and closer connections between game and player, and those can only be good for gaming in general. ■



ABOVE: *Unpacking* from Witch Beam marries a block-fitting puzzle with a cosy lack of stress and a sense of nostalgia.

you both collect creatures and serve food, decorating your café and accommodating customers' needs in order to gain experience and level up. Serving food requires a minigame, which are all fairly forgiving and will give you XP even if you don't get them quite right, so it takes away the stress of failure. There's even latte art.

Creator Eleanor Gregory was a big fan of *Animal Crossing* before she became a game dev, starting work at

started from something kind of self indulgent to be honest. I went with a wholesome setting that I thought would make a good game, and also would personally love to spend time with. I love fantasy animals, and I also have a lot of good memories of good times at animal cafés. As the [cosy] genre kind of developed over the last couple of years, there's a whole lot of exciting vibrant settings to explore."

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Make-up time

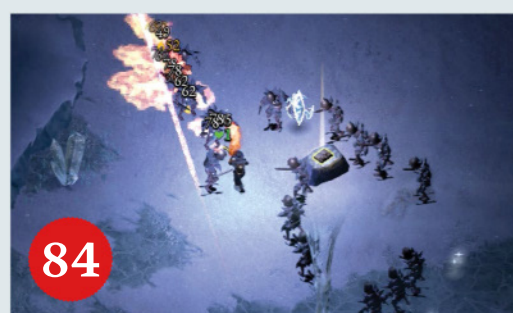
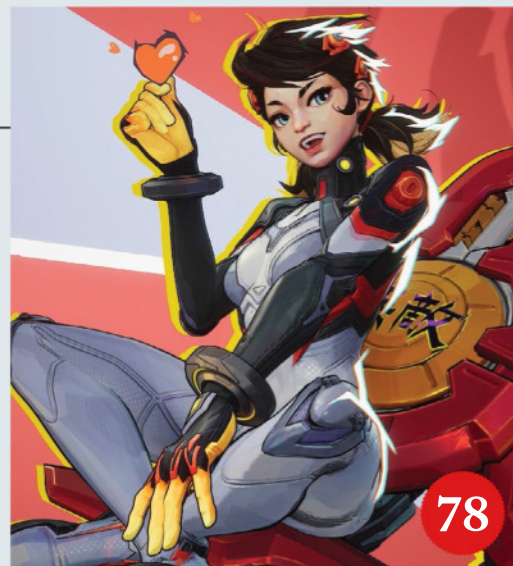
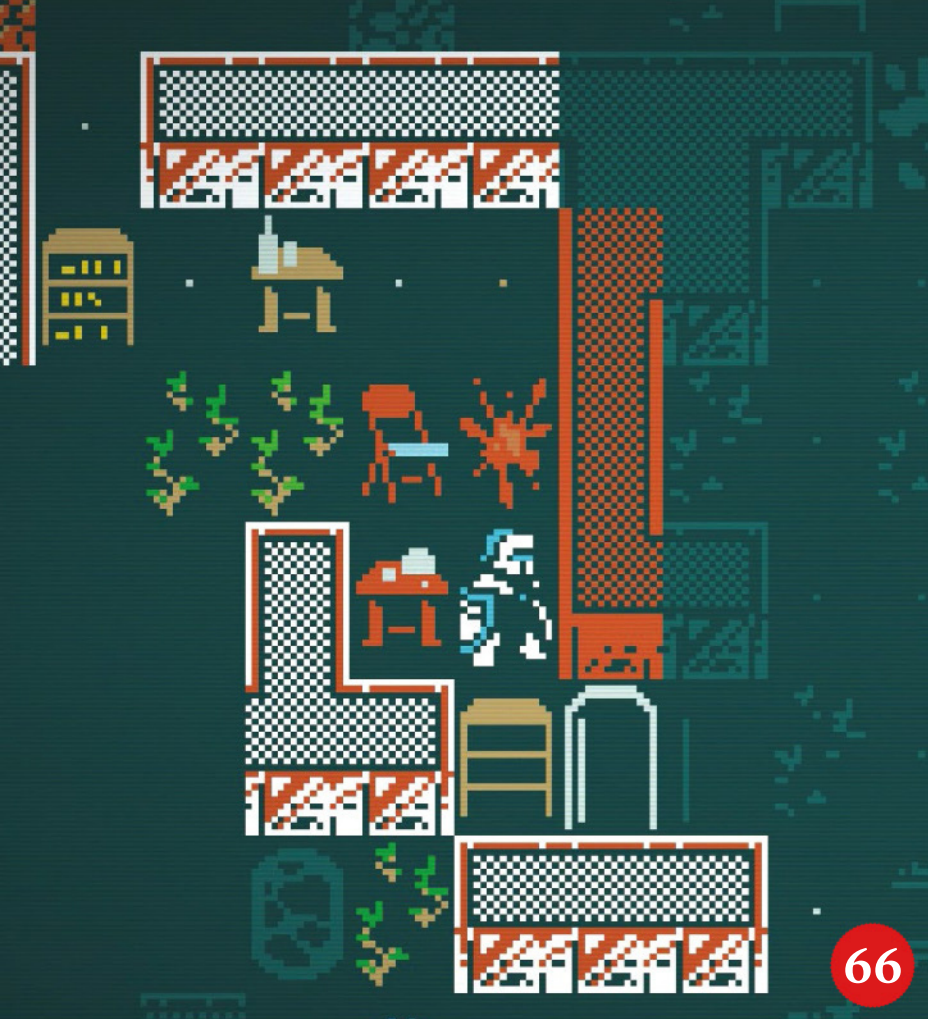
At the time of writing, PC Gamer has the largest editorial team in gaming journalism, with many of the very finest industry writers on our staff. However, despite this, there have simply been so many top games released on PC over the last year that we've not managed to cover all of them at launch. If anything, this shows the PC gaming industry's remarkable ability to keep on producing fantastic new experiences even when, at the big-business end at least, many studios are being shuttered.

As such, while we've got some notable new games reviewed this issue, we've also got a selection of older games that, due to their quality, we felt we needed to go back and do make-up reviews for. These are games worthy of our attention too, as their high scores this issue prove. Enjoy!

R. Jones

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PRINT EDITOR
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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's tormented reviewers...



JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Whimsical distractions
Currently playing
Caves of Qud
This month
Fought horrors from
the darkest corners of
the cosmos. We call
them console gamers.



ELIE GOULD
Specialist in
Wearing spandex
Currently playing
Marvel Rivals
This month
Decided to go to Edna
Mode for a new
superhero costume.
There were... no capes!



JOSH WOLENS
Specialist in
Rob Zombie's beard
Currently playing
Hall of Torment
This month
Torched his many
enemies with a giant
flamethrower. Oh, and
in *Halls of Torment* he...



TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Comeuppance
Currently playing
Mouthwashing
This month
Ran around PC Gamer
Towers brushing
people's teeth. We've
told him about that.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Elementary deductions
Currently playing
Sherlock Holmes
This month
Worked out that, yes,
console gamers are in
fact 67% less attractive
than PC gamers. Fact.



CHEW THIS

CAVES OF QUD is an epic science-fantasy RPG

By Jonathan Bolding

Across the great salt desert there is a jungled plateau encircled by mountains and speckled with the ruins of an advanced, ancient civilisation. At its centre lies the Spindle, a towering cable that stretches into and through the heavens. This is where your stranger arrives, the protagonist in an epic science-fantasy RPG full of engrossing stories and elegantly designed, deep world simulation. It's the best one I've ever played.

Caves of Qud is a traditional roguelike RPG in form, a top-down, turn-based game that relies on text and simple-yet-evocative graphics to convey its world. It doesn't stick hard and fast to permanent death, though, instead letting you choose whether you want save points and even tweak how much fighting you'll have to do. Nor does *Qud* stick hard and fast to the traditional roguelike rules of having an opaque, frustrating user interface and arcane, entirely keyboard-driven control scheme – it even plays very well on a mobile PC like the Steam Deck.

You make your character from a variety of archetypes that describe teched-up normal humans or the far more numerous mutant inhabitants of Qud. You then build in a relatively freeform way, choosing new skills,

upgrading your abilities and gathering equipment for a dizzying array of possibilities. From there you set off across Qud from your starting village in true RPG sandbox fashion, choosing to follow or not follow the many quests and whimsical distractions you may come across. A lot of that will involve carefully delving into the ruins of the ancient civilisation of the Eaters of Earth,

fighting the creatures you find there, and pilfering their treasures.

Each playthrough has the same world map but randomises nearly every local area according to a complex system of generated histories chronicling the sultans who ruled Qud in ages past. What they did then influences what you find now, where you go and what you can expect to find there – and it

A seasoned player can burn through the main story in 15 hours

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sprawling science-fantasy RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Freehold Games

PUBLISHER
Kitfox Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cavesofqud.com

integrates that generated history into the main story quest's fixed objectives in clever ways that you might otherwise think had the hand of a designer behind them. Though it may take you a hundred hours to really get to grips with and master *Qud*, a seasoned player can burn through the main story in 15 hours.

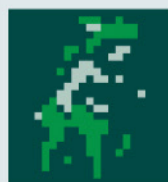
LAYER CAKE

The big-idea, high-weirdness science-fantasy world of Qud's far future is of an old genre (think *Dune*) with its own tropes, such as influence from ancient cultures and mythology, but one that's so underutilised in videogames that the setting comes off as refreshing. The spires of humanity's ruined past sit below and on top of Qud, forming a layer cake of dungeons filled with objects from a civilisation so outrageously advanced that they invented teleportation and mined the neutron-degenerate matter at the heart of dead stars. The Eaters' civilisation was once so advanced that its fall was just as spectacular as its rise, leaving Qud a vast ruin cut off from the universe and scoured by terrible plagues – fresh water is so precious, for example, that a dram of the fluid is the only true currency on Qud.

Pure-blooded 'normal' people have become one of many different successor species, and ancient genetic engineering combined with reality-altering phenomena have unleashed a tidal wave of strange creatures onto this world – the many talking plants, for example, barely register as exciting compared to a Twinning Lamprey, which exists in a strange quantum state where it will die only when both its bodies are killed simultaneously. Qud is a world where you start off fighting Hyena-people in a swamp with a bronze dagger and end it clad in zetachrome armour made of forgotten matter from the start of the universe, fighting mecha and cosmic terrors while wielding an eigenrifle that fires a subatomic

QUICK PICKS

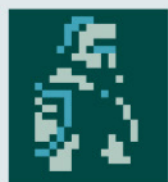
Some examples of *Qud* player-characters



MARSH TAUR
The marsh taur uses a freezing ray to keep enemies in place. Downside: you do need two pairs of boots. Boo.



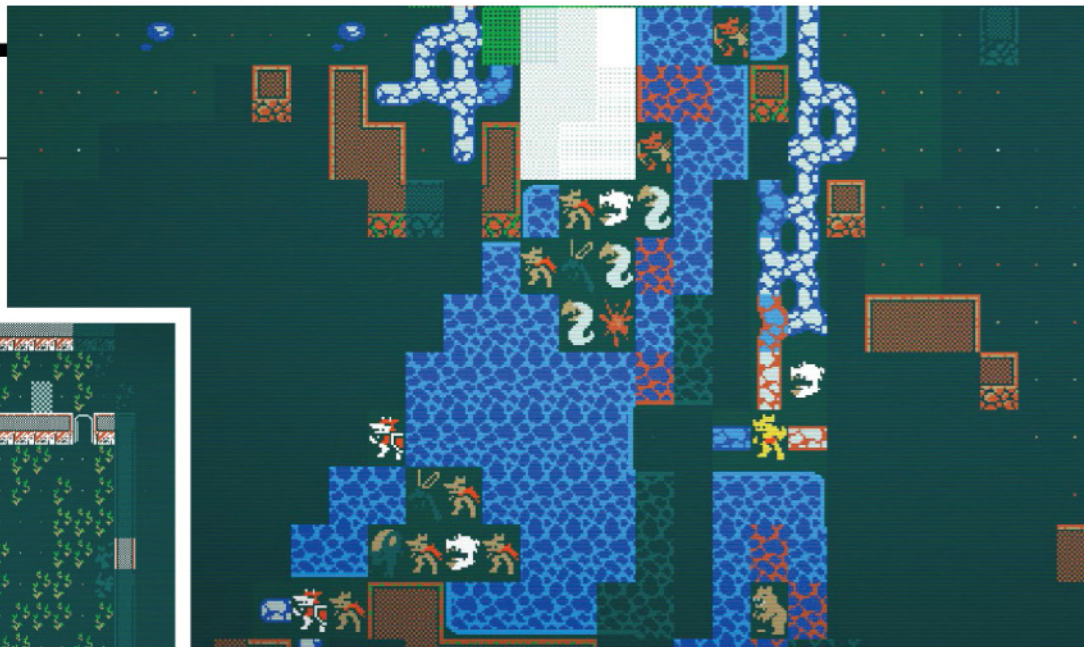
BZZZT
A bug with the power to generate their own electricity and an affinity for tech. Downside: honestly kind of gross.



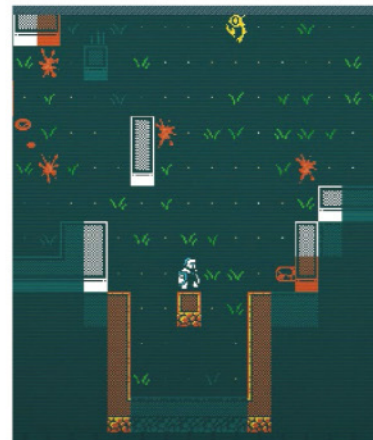
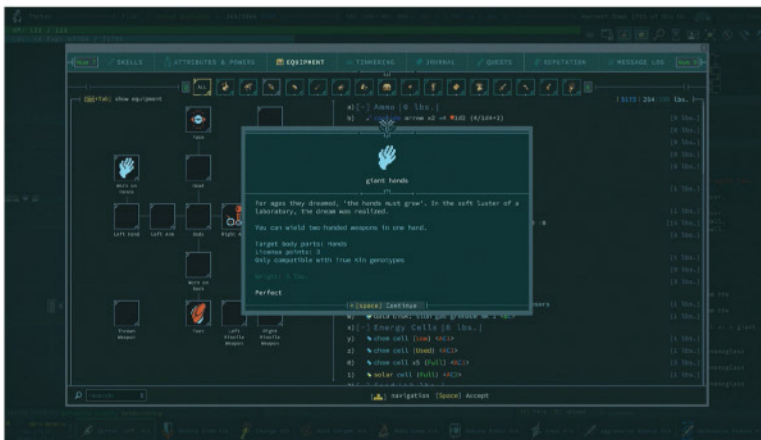
PRAETORIAN PRIME
A true-human guardian from an icy arcology. Always on watch thanks to built-in night vision.



FIRST GARDENER
From the jungles comes a master of stalking the underbrush for tasty treats – makes use of the buffs you get.



ABOVE: A thermal grenade in a river makes an impromptu mist screen.



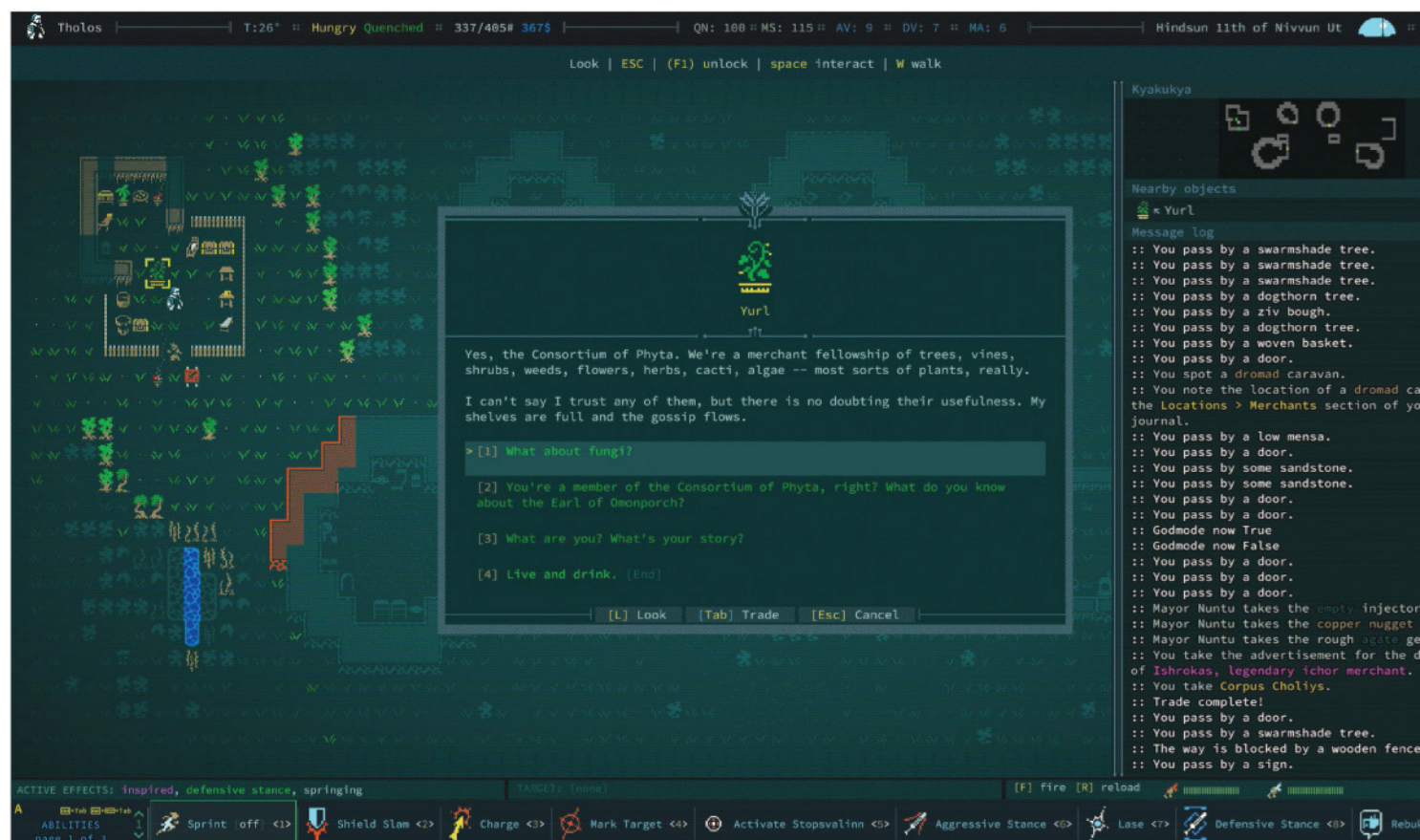
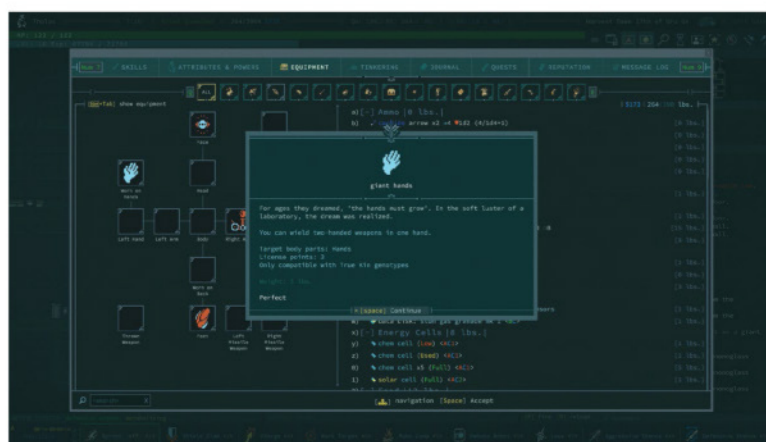
BELOW: Statues of ancient sultans give valuable historical clues.





ABOVE: Sometimes a crit makes blood go... everywhere: wall, table, chair.

RIGHT: Occasionally you just have to break out the freeze ray for fast enemies.



particle beam capable of piercing every single thing on the screen.

The main quest takes you on a journey well-suited to pit stops, dotted with odd characters such as a deaf-mute albino bear-porcupine gunsmith and a very rude talking fungus you have to bring with you by letting it grow on your skin. It

also stays varied: you'll delve ancient ruins for lost technology, yes, but also manage diplomacy among factions, make friends, solve riddles, and unpick that generated history. All of this is written in a prose so flowery and rich that it passes beyond purple and arrives in the same place as something like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The world and writing and story are so appealing in part because *Qud* draws from a diverse set of sources that aren't just other videogames and obvious, obligate nerd pop-culture stuff. Its cultural borders extend well outside the limits of so many games. It's rare we get the pleasure of playing a videogame influenced by *Dune* or *The Book of the New Sun* or *Gamma World* that also freely quotes Lord Byron and AE Housman.

GET WEIRD

Your character's traits and background will be just as rich as the world's. You might play a True Kin, one of the last unmutated remnants of old humanity close enough to their biology and genome that the Eaters' technology, robots, cybernetic implants and miracle medicines still recognise and work for you, enhancing yourself with cyberware like extra-large hands and firearm hardpoints to wield four two-handed chainguns at once. You might instead be a mutant with a beak, wings, night vision and talons whose mutations grow in power until they can sunder steel. Your mutant might have psychic powers like cryokinesis and telepathy and disintegration. You might even play as a purely physical chimera that grows 12 arms.

It's not just variety that makes *Qud* so much fun, it's the depth of simulation in the world you explore. Aside from your health value or the rare damage calculation that can go to the hundreds, you rarely have to deal with numbers larger than 30

when considering statistics and attributes. But *Qud*'s world is powered by a physics simulation that lets you drill through walls with a jackhammer or melt rock into lava or spread clouds of corrosive gas that shift in the wind. The characters you meet all have a faction and a base attitude and an allegiance to it that

plays out in hilarious ways: you might be beloved by apes, causing the shaggy white monsters that roam the canyons to leap to your defence, or hated by insects, causing typically chill giant dragonflies to

come after you with a vengeance. Manipulating other factions' attitudes toward you is key to enjoying *Qud*, causing you to form alliances with groups like the machine-worshipping Mechanimists or become self-appointed protector of the villagers of a randomly generated town.

STAY WEIRD

Random generation can of course make or break a game like *Qud*. Sometimes it's against you in the most hilarious ways, sometimes it's just frustrating as you plumb some

deep stratum praying that the next chest has some upgrade – please, any upgrade – for your gun or armour. Sometimes it's for you as it spits out a unique relic that feels purpose-made to fit just the character you wanted to play – as a sword-wielding knight I once found a shield that could reflect enemy lasers back at them.

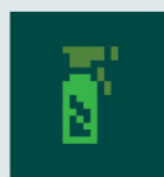
Your tolerance for unpleasant, run-ending (or save-reloading) surprises has to be pretty high as you first discover things like which robot is armed with missile rack, how to kill a Twinning Lamprey, and how when you see a biblically accurate angel you should just run away. You can contract infections or lose a limb, but to enjoy yourself those must be interesting problems to solve or situations to exploit, part of your overall story rather than frustrations. The fun to find in *Qud* is about learning – reading the flavour text for hints, figuring out which randomly-generated named creature to befriend, and carrying a variety of tools for different situations. Always have an EMP grenade on hand, for example, to deal with wayward robots. You have to be willing to try and fail and to learn when it's better to run away, consolidate your gains, and try again tomorrow. Every challenge in *Qud* was not hand-made to be beaten. Quite the opposite, in fact.

That is no surprise to fans of the traditional roguelike's deep details and convoluted systems and surprising random events. For others it will be unpleasant at first. *Caves of Qud* has what is likely the best, most modern interface and controls in a game of its kind, but the experience is still at times frustrating as you try to unravel just what happened in the last combat round that caused you to die. For some who have not played games like this before, simply the act of learning to control and manoeuvre your character will be frustrating. Despite this I cannot recommend *Caves of Qud* enough for its innovations in mechanics and storytelling, however anachronistic it may look. Besides, on top of it all? You can easily mod this game. ■

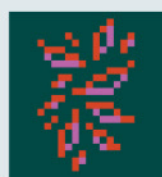
When you see a biblically accurate angel you should just run away

HILARIOUS STUFF TO TRY

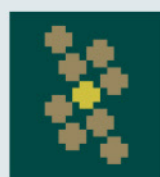
Qud gets real funny, real fast sometimes



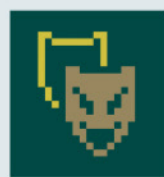
SPRAY-A-BRAIN
An item to turn an inanimate object into a new friend. Tables, doors, you name it.



MUMBLE MOUTH
A fungal infection that whispers secrets of the universe to you. Definitely worth it.



PSYCHIC GLIMMER
Sufficiently powerful psychics attract extradimensional assassins. Uh-oh.



EVIL TWIN
You can kill the evil twin, cut off its face, and wear that on your own face for a bonus. Yes!



PHASE OUT
Move your matter to the next dimension over. Be sure not to come back inside a solid object.



HOOKEH
You can smoke mint waterpipe with a camel-man like it's the 1990s all over again. Dude!

PC GAMER VERDICT

Caves of Qud is a genre-defining achievement in play, story and roleplaying freedom. Sweet!

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GOLDEN BALLS

Pachinko deckbuilder **BALLIONAIRE** has a joyous spring in its step

By Abbie Stone

In 2007, a game called *Peggle* was released. In 2008, the world suffered a global economic crisis. To this day I refuse to believe these two facts were unrelated. *Peggle* was as all-consumingly moreish as it was simple – it was essentially just a pachinko machine, where you fired a ball into a screen full of ‘pegs’. The only agency you had was the direction you fired the ball in. After that, all you could do is sit back and watch, making it almost entirely luck-based.

Once you finally accepted that, the spell would hopefully break, and you could finally uninstall the bloody thing. But now developer newobject has come up with *Ballionaire*, a twist on pachinko that adds roguelike deckbuilding elements. Essentially *Peggle* has gone to college, smartened up and gotten itself a master’s degree in compelling strategy gameplay. Oh no. Oh God no.

The goal is to make enough money to pay a tribute that has to be cleared every seven balls. The starter tribute is \$500, which is worrying, because the board is initially a complete tightwad. Hitting these pegs pays out a pathetic one dollar apiece, the kind of financial reward that would embarrass even a games journalist. Luckily, after every ball you get a choice of three obstacles (also, a little confusingly, called balls) that you can add to the table. A trampoline will pay out \$200 if you hit it, and bounce the ball upwards. A smiling tree will also pay out \$200, but only if you hit it from the bottom up. Ah, but as an apology for that irritating caveat, the tree also gains a small multiplier bonus after every single ball played, meaning it can become a substantial payout in the late game.

TRAMPOLINE BALL

Oooh, hang on! If I place the trampoline ball under the tree, I’m far more likely to get that lovely multiplier money. And naturally this kind of synchronicity is what you’re

aiming for with every ball you place on the table. Some balls are ‘droppers’ which means they’ll drop another ball when you hit them. These pair well with ‘holders’ that will hold onto any balls that hit them and give some lovely bonus in return. Crucially, some balls automatically activate at the start of each go, like a fantastic butterfly ball that flies up the screen.

RANDOMNESS

The trick here is to put together a Heath Robinson machine so sophisticated that any randomness doesn’t stand a chance. There’s a Piggy Bank ball that pays out \$800 for every coin ball it’s holding, and I’ve become obsessed with moulding my entire strategy around stuffing coin balls into it, regardless of what tools the game is offering me. Idiocy? Well, yes, but the runs where

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A pachinko machine you can actually manipulate into a strategic little roguelike

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.30

DEVELOPER
newobject

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics

MULTIPLAYER
Well, you can share your tables with other players. Does this count?

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2667120/Ballionaire

my beloved pig stratagem has worked have given me gloriously satisfying payouts.

Balls are divided into subcategories, such as Agers, Movers, etc. I had fun slowly working out what all these different terms meant. And that’s good news because the game did a pretty lousy job of explaining them. There’s a Ballipedia tucked away in the pause screen that gives you details on every ball, but often only gives you half the information you want. “Adjacent triggers to this ball have a +0.1 multi for each coin ball held.” OK, cool, and a ‘trigger’ is...?

FIVE DIFFICULTIES

There are five difficulties, with the highest forcing you to place horrible annoyances on your lovely table. One has to be hit 500 times before the end of the game, or you lose. I love these bastards. Worrying about them while also still trying to hit those required tributes is a great, tricky balancing act.

I just wish it went further. After you’ve cleared the five difficulties, that’s your lot, and it feels like the game could easily keep escalating – look at all the horrible debuffs on offer in the create your own table mode! The lack of an endless mode is disappointing too – it’d be a perfect addition.

But maybe it’s greedy to complain about longevity when I got 20 fun hours out of *Ballionaire*. It’s a marvellous start to a year that follows the launch of the almighty *Balatro*, and with a few updates this could easily become my new podcast game of choice. For now, it’s the elevator pitch of a *Peggle* deckbuilder, ball-illiantly executed. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ballionaire from newobject is a pachinko-roguelike that properly rewards strategic play. Terrific fun indeed.

80

NEW BALLS PLEASE

Common drops that are well worth taking



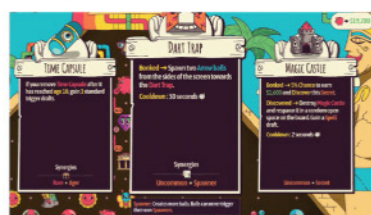
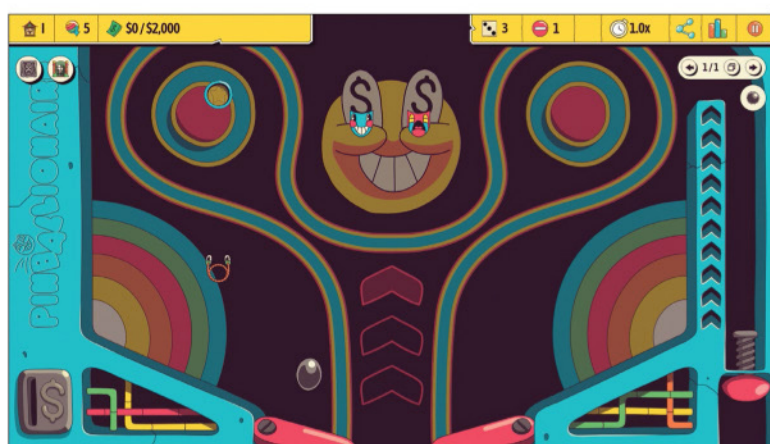
BUMPER
Bounces the ball across the screen. Make sure you place something good in its path.



CATERPILLAR
Transforms into a brilliant butterfly ball, but only if you DON'T hit it for five rounds...



BALLOON
Sends a balloon ball floating UP the screen. Suck it, physics! Yeah loser, suck it.



ABOVE: Trust me when I say the Deathwheel stage has been named with no hyperbole whatsoever.

FAR LEFT: The pinball table, with its finite-use flippers, is the best of the bunch.

BELOW: The opening pyramid table has the same point of entry for the ball every time. Other tables aren't as predictable.



MINTY FRESH

MOUTHWASHING is my new feel-bad favourite horror game

By Ted Litchfield

I played *Mouthwashing* entirely in one sitting and had to lie down for a while afterward to recover. I felt vile, unsettled at what I'd seen over the previous three hours. *Mouthwashing* is about as classic a walking simulator as you can get mechanically, and while its stabs at more intensive gameplay fall a little flat for me, its narrative, vision, and atmosphere make it one of this winter's standouts, a people's champion of indie horror for very good reason.

The game begins with you playing as Captain Curly of the long haul delivery space ship Tulpar, purposefully setting the vessel on a collision course with an asteroid.

After crash landing, the ship is compromised while Curly is horrifically maimed and burned in the crash, leaving him unable to speak but still painfully aware of everything around him.

Mouthwashing swaps between Curly's perspective before the crash and first mate/acting captain Jimmy's after. The Tulpar is an incredible environment, strangely homey before the crash despite the omnipresent motivational posters from Amazon-esque employer Pony Express. The Tulpar's full of great clutter and character details to make it feel lived-in, and swapping between its pre- and post-crash states helps underline how drastically things are degrading in the present day.

There's nothing supernatural about the horror in *Mouthwashing*,

just the brutal fallout of a human drama downstream from capitalism. It's a story about how a life without a future makes someone sour, the small joys and overwhelming horror

Feels like a scab being ripped off to let loose a firehose of pus

to be found in shit work, and how even the worst circumstances don't necessarily make one's actions sympathetic or justified. The crew members have all been curdled by the lives they were funnelled

into, with the banal cruelty of their employer implied to be itself driven by the continued automation of their industry – unmanned ships don't go crazy and crash themselves into asteroids, after all.

When things go utterly tits up as rescue continues to be a no-show, it feels like a scab being ripped off to let loose a firehose of pus. The ugliness and inhumanity in the later stages of the story were always there, simmering and fermenting, the logical conclusion of people forced to live as processes.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An utterly gruesome narrative horror game about the worst workplace in history

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Wrong Organ

PUBLISHER
Critical Reflex

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12600K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.
com/app/2475490/
Mouthwashing/

POINT AND CLICK

The actual gameplay of *Mouthwashing* is less consistent than the story. Most of it goes down smooth, and there are a few strokes of genius that continue to impress me. Then there are some stinker moments that really crapped in my soup – and not like, “This game is supposed to make me feel bad,” more like, “This feels like a mistake, or I am frustrated and missing something”.

For the most part, *Mouthwashing* has very straightforward problem solving: finding various forms of key (numerical code, isopropyl alcohol, gun) to open various forms of lock (door, REDACTED, REDACTED). Tactile little interactions with the mouse are used to great effect: the way you have to click around to pry open Curly's jaw and feed him painkillers is a brilliant mechanic that's gruesomely echoed in various scenes throughout the game.

Mouthwashing takes a few stabs at more hands-on gameplay where it mostly falters. There are two puzzles right at the end of the game that are, aesthetically and thematically, absolute heaters: Climactic, shocking moments that really socked me in the gut. But my horror and disgust were undermined by them being fiddly, obtuse little exercises that overstayed their welcome – I'm not proud to say I googled to see what the hell I was supposed to be doing. Meanwhile, I could have done without a particularly laborious stealth sequence partway through, a game of red light green light that goes on for way too long.

But in terms of atmosphere and narrative – the most important parts of a narrative adventure – *Mouthwashing* is a home run. ■

MEET THE CREW

The stranded employees of Pony Express



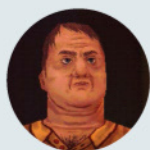
CURLY
Captain of the Tulpar, well-liked and experienced.



JIMMY
First mate, acting captain after the crash.



ANYA
Ship's nurse saddled with responsibilities beyond her training.



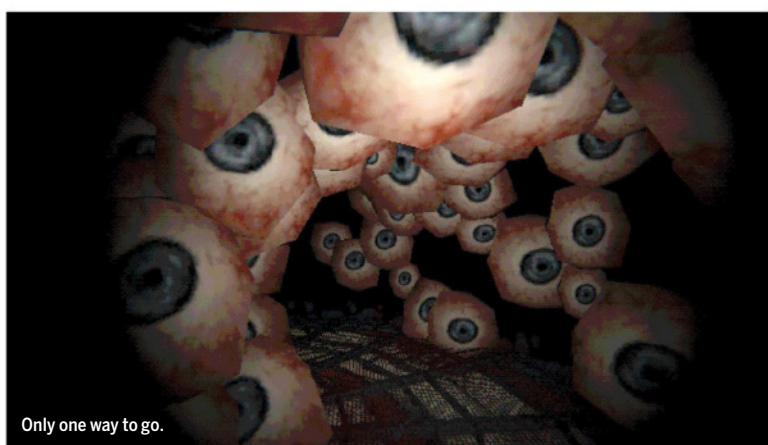
SWANSEA
Embittered 15-year Pony Express employee.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Mouthwashing is my favourite horror game of recent times, and has one of the best narratives, period.

87

A great moment
marred by a
wonky puzzle.



Only one way to go.



LEFT: Aww, look
how much fun
they're having!

BELOW: A crew
meeting shortly
after the crash.



REEL GOOD

WEBFISHING is a fantastic throwback to old-school chatroom games

By Mollie Taylor

The constant search for nostalgia often ends in disappointment, but *Webfishing* is different. It's managed to capture things I loved so dearly about the bizarre social chatroom games of the 2000s – *Habbo Hotel*, *IMVU*, *Gaia Online* – while cultivating the kind of community I never really found in those older romps.

Mere minutes into booting up *Webfishing*, and I knew I was stumbling into something special. It's crunchy-looking in all the right ways, sporting a pixelated, low-polygon art style reminiscent of earlier *Animal Crossing* games. But instead of being the sole human isekai'd into an animal world, I get to be the critter. I can choose from a cat or a sort of wolf-dog hybrid – I go for a cat, of course – before either jumping into an offline lobby or joining up to 11 other players, ready to rod and roll.

Playing alone is fun in its own right. It's good for when I feel like exploring *Webfishing*'s small island with all its nooks and crannies, doodling on the floor with some chalk or simply needing a chat-free

fish. But *Webfishing*'s magic comes from throwing my hook out alongside other rod-wielding cats and dogs that are there

I mean, I can press 'G' to meow to my fellow fishers, first of all, which is very satisfying and very important stuff. But *Webfishing*'s

I can pick a spot, set my character down and stay there for hours

focus on casting your line and the quiet serenity between catches is the perfect vessel to start chatting with other folks in the lobby. I'm normally quite an anxious gamer these days – I stick with my pals, and rarely end up engaging in conversations with strangers or people I'm unfamiliar with. Spitting out a sentence in *Webfishing* causes my character to make vague animal garble grumbles, and I found myself making a lot of them.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A crunchy-looking social chatroom game all about big catches

EXPECT TO PAY

£4.30

DEVELOPER

lamedeveloper

PUBLISHER

lamedeveloper

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 2700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

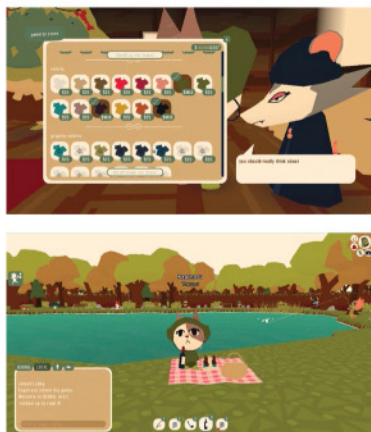
webfishing.net

FIN-TASTIC

Maybe it's the kind of audience a game like *Webfishing* attracts – the Venn diagram of folk like me who grew up with Nintendo DS-era *Animal Crossing* and spent way too much time in chatroom MMOs – but I've yet to come across a lobby full of players who I couldn't get along with. Another writer at PC Gamer likened *Webfishing* to millennial *Roblox*, and I think that's quite possibly the most accurate descriptor I could give to the game.

Outside of all the social ongoing, the actual fishing itself is a lovely experience, too. I'm able to cast my line out anywhere I please, which is something I appreciate. No walking around every body of water looking for vaguely fish-shaped silhouettes or perfect rippling circles of aquatic activity. The latter does exist, but only as a way to up the catch rate.

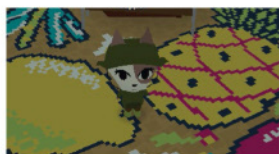
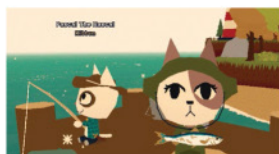
It means I can pick a spot, set my character down and stay there for hours if I wanted to. No fighting with other players for prime catch spots, and no endlessly wandering around. I would regularly find groups all piled together at the ocean dock, peacefully fishing side by side. The act of reeling



ABOVE: You can even buy bottles of wine out of vending machines, which is maybe the only way I would enjoy fishing in real life.



Rule one of *Webfishing*: upon catching a big fish, everyone must type "biiiii fish" in chat.



TOP: Fishing is more fun with friends.

FAR RIGHT: Laying out various props to carve out your own space is one of the smaller joys in this game.

in a fish is relatively simple – wait for a bite, and then a screen pops up in where I have to fill a bar while breaking through certain hurdles. Rod upgrades let me deal more hits to each barricade – it might require two or even 20 hits to break – with higher numbers usually meaning better catches.

FUNNEL A FISH

I can then funnel all those fish over to a merchant for cash, which I can use to replenish bait, buy clothes, instruments, drawing chalk, even lottery scratchers and gain access to private islands. The latter is a neat side feature of *Webfishing*, which lets me plop down a flag and teleport to my own instanced spot which I can decorate with furniture. Other people from the lobby can jump in too, and it's a nice way to break up spending time on the same island all the time.

That's been the nicest surprise as I've continued to sink in hours – the game is small in scope, yet I'm still finding new things to do and places to explore. Getting to do that alongside a scoop of nostalgia and I imagine I'll be diving into *Webfishing* for many months to come. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

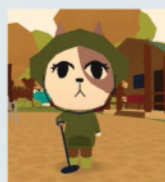
Webfishing by lamedeveloper is a delightful dose of chatroom nostalgia and a cosy fishing experience.

85



MULTI-HOBBYIST

Beyond the rod in Webfishing



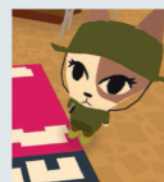
TREASURE HUNTING

Why gamble in the sea when you can gamble in the soil? Whip out the metal detector instead.



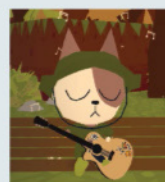
LOTTO SCRATCHERS

As a gacha gaming sicko, *Webfishing's* lotto tickets have become my sole reason for fishing.



FLOOR ARTISTRY

I can't draw to save my life, but the chalk lets people cook up some floor doodles, mandatory phallic drawings included.



MUSICAL PERFORMANCES

Grab a guitar or tambourine and soundtrack everyone else's fishing. Strum out some tunes.

FELINE FINE

Sekiro gets flattened, but no less brilliant, in the sublime **NINE SOLS**

By Abbie Stone

Six months. That's how long poor Red Candle Games spent trying to come up with a combat move for its debut Metroidvania that was as unique as *Hollow Knight's* downward slash. Personally, I would have given up after six minutes. Thankfully, the developer was made of more disciplined stuff, and its efforts have paid off magnificently. Because I think *Nine Sols'* swordplay has every Soulslike of recent times beat (yes, even the one about the shadowy tree).

You play as Yi, a feline samurai who looks cute, but is actually as shadily motivated and untrustworthy as my actual cat. After taking a seemingly fatal tumble off a cliff, Yi cashes in one of his nine lives and recovers in a village full of actual humans. But when the village engages in a ridiculously violent ritual, one that's apparently been conceived by someone who's seen Hereditary too many times, Yi abandons it to start exploring a mysterious facility. He's seeking out a wonderfully charismatic series of utter bastards worthy of a *Metal Gear* game, so he can slice them all into ribbons.

Red Candle Games' first major achievement is successfully squashing *Sekiro's* parry-or-perish combat into two dimensions. Incidentally, if you're not a fan of parrying, then take 90 points off the review score. You can muddle through for a while with the dodge button, and there's a small window either side of a perfect parry where the game takes off health that'll regenerate incredibly slowly (wow, thanks). But these small concessions aren't going to save you for long. Refuse to learn that parry properly, and the game's first boss will absolutely call your bluff, merrily decorating the walls with your insides. Lovely.

HERE COMES THE BOOM

Luckily you have an ace up your sleeve worthy of *Balatro*. *Nine Sols'* masterstroke is that simply pulling off a parry isn't just a reward in itself

here. It also fills up your Qi, which Yi uses to slap deadly talismans on his enemies. So long as you keep that slap button held down uninterrupted, the talisman will explode, often a

fatal experience for the poor sap you slapped it on. You'll find mods for these too, like one that briefly freezes enemies in place when you talisman-slap them, or offering a more powerful explosion

depending on how long you can keep your finger on the trigger.

In time-honoured Soulslike tradition, the bosses start off seemingly impossible. But stick with it, and you'll gradually master the parry timing and rhythm of parry-talisman-boom-repeat. When you finally ricochet and detonate your way through a boss battle without taking a single blow, it feels like taking down Ornstein and Smough blindfolded. With a *Guitar Hero* controller. That's not even plugged in.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Sci-fi Metroidvania with sublimely satisfying parry-flavoured combat

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Red Candle Games

PUBLISHER
Red Candle Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme,
16GB RAM,
AMD Radeon Graphics

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.
com/app/1809540/
Nine_Sols

When you're not repeating a boss fight five million times, you'll find plenty of tight platforming challenges, clever puzzles and well-hidden secrets that make it a pleasure to explore. That this studio has never made a Metroidvania before is just ridiculous. The combat is the main draw, but it also knows how to tell an entertaining story, full of intrigue, humour and terrifying moments worthy of the studio's horror roots. Even its initially slightly tired setting (can we ban the word 'warehouse' from level designers' vocabulary?) gets increasingly more surreal and inspired with each new area.

Nitpicks? Well, it can be a little overly chatty, especially when you get back to your main hub and find every NPC wants to monologue at you. Still, when the dialogue is so consistently entertaining, who cares? Besides, without NPCs, the game wouldn't have Shuanshuan, Yi's surrogate son, and you'll pluck him from my cold dead fingers. Shuanshuan is an adorable human child that Yi saves early on, the beating heart that makes *Nine Sols'* gruesome body horror go down a little easier. He doodles on the walls, writes fan fiction of your adventures and occasionally does something useful. The precious little guy also hero-worships Yi, despite increasing evidence that Yi is far from deserving of such treatment.

Ah, but I've already said too much. Go find out for yourself how great *Nine Sols* is. Hold out for endlessly delayed games like *Hollow Knight: Silksong* if you must, but I'd highly recommend picking up one of the best games of recent months while you're waiting. ■

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

The brilliant companions you'll meet...



SHUANSHUAN
Unbearably cute moppet who's also your biggest cheerleader. Awww!



SHENNONG
Consumes poison, but also produces health bar-extending alcohol. O... K...

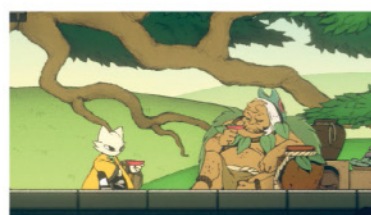
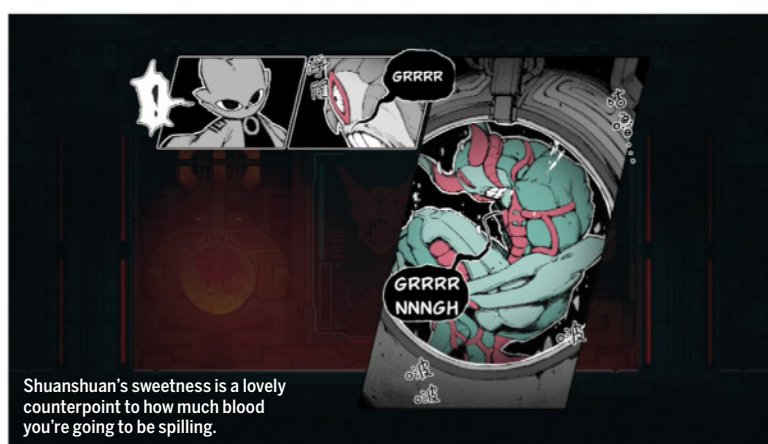


WENG
Shuanshuan is about as cute as a dead trout compared to Weng. Sorry!

PC GAMER VERDICT

A masterful Metroidvania that builds on *Sekiro's* combat and tells a great sci-fi story too. Unmissable stuff.

92



ABOVE: Nothing is as beautiful as this game's comic book-style cutscenes. NOTHING. AT ALL.

BELOW: Boss fights are brilliantly built up, like this surveillance-obsessed one who watches you throughout the level.



RIVALS ASSEMBLE

MARVEL RIVALS' chaotic fun may be short-lived

Elie Gould

It seems like every moment of my spare time nowadays is spent in a hero shooter. When I'm not fighting for my life in *Valorant*, I'm doing the same thing in *Overwatch 2* or with the bots in *Team Fortress 2*. So the last thing I really need is a hero shooter I actually enjoy and will, therefore, carve more time out of my day playing it: enter *Marvel Rivals*.

I didn't expect *Marvel Rivals* to get a grips on me so quickly, but I'm having a good time feeling out the kits of its 33 launch heroes divided into three classes: vanguard, duelist, and strategist (tank, DPS, and support), every one of which also includes unique 'team-up' abilities activated by building the right team composition. I've been maining Hawkeye, which I am ashamed to admit, considering how strong he is right now.

It's always fun to go through the wringer with a new hero shooter, especially at the chaotic beginnings. At first, I found it hard to recognise who was hitting you and where. I spent a lot of my time getting shot in the back by Moon Knight's Ankh, which he can set down and then reflect projectiles off.

Eventually, I was able to pick up on the sound the Ankh made when it

reflected darts, and it became second nature to destroy it before trying to run for cover. There are loads of these little learning curves to master, many of which will feel familiar for *Overwatch* vets.

There's nothing quite like reflexively sleeping an enemy Scarlet Witch with Mantis before she ults or pushing away a diving Wolverine without a second thought before he can sink his claws into you.

Getting to know each of the eight launch maps is also a lot of fun

There are a lot of intuitive abilities and counters in *Marvel Rivals* – all you have to do is take the time and have the patience to learn them.

HELL'S HEAVEN

Getting to know each of the eight launch maps is also a lot of fun. *Rivals'* maps are one of its most distinctive features, as battlegrounds transform throughout a match, either

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person hero shooter in which you play as various Marvel heroes in teams of six

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
NetEase Games

PUBLISHER
NetEase Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2767030/Marvel_Rivals

through dynamic destruction or bespoke map events. It's a good way to shake up a match and can also be used to turn the tide in your favour. If there's a particular spot that a Black Widow player likes to perch on, for example, chances are you can blast it for a few seconds to destroy that vantage point. Unfortunately, the map will build itself back up every now and then, so it's best to be on the lookout for pesky Natasha.

Although I thought I was losing it when walls kept appearing in front of me on Klyntar, it turns out that the map's walls periodically shift around and literally change its blueprint, sorta like the Clockwork Mansion in *Dishonored 2*. This can be a blessing and a curse as it can sometimes cut off long lines of sight, which can protect attacking teams but also means you need to switch up your angles.

There's a great choice of maps right now. None of them seem too familiar, and all of them have enough going on that I'm sure, over time, players will find cool nooks and crannies to exploit and explore. I'm already finding helpful shortcuts or useful hiding spots scattered around the place, which help me escape the clutches of angry enemy heroes.

33'S A CROWD

Starting with 33 heroes is a bold move, considering most other hero shooters begin with a smaller roster that's easier for new players to digest before growing over time. The character select screen is a bit daunting, but the expansive lineup is also great because it means there's something for everyone.

You have your straightforward heroes like Black Widow or Hawkeye, pure aimskill heroes who rely on players landing headshots. Punisher is your beginner-friendly Soldier 76 type with an assault rifle, and there are tanks like Groot and Magneto, who just place shields and gradually wear down the front line.

KILLER INSTINCTS

Inside the mind of Jeff the Land Shark



1 CHOMPING
Every Jeff player is looking for the team wipe with their ultimate that can swallow up any player caught in its radius.

2 JUSTICE
Jeff is also an apt healer. With his primary water gun fire, he can heal allies, completing his role as a part of the team.

3 NOTHING
This little guy rarely has a single thought pass through his head, and that's why he looks so happy.



FAR LEFT: Jeff the Land Shark's ultimate.

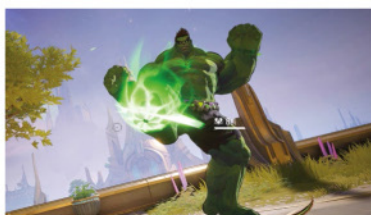
BELOW: Groot and Hulk mid-fight. Green heroes FTW!





RIGHT: Hulk stomping on the ground, as he is wont to do.

BELOW: Jeff the Land Shark sat on Groot's shoulder, healing him.



Then, on the slightly more complicated side, you have your rapid-dive heroes like Iron Fist, Psylocke and Spider-Man. These heroes are a little trickier to get the hang of, but it's high-risk, high reward because I don't think there's anything scarier than a genuinely skilled Spider-Man player.

Marvel Rivals manages to cater to most sections of the hero shooter playerbase with characters that have varying skill ceilings and purposes. You can hide in the back, sniping or healing, or be in the midst of battle, darting around or breaking down walls with brute strength. On the other hand, this massive roster of heroes is also *Marvel Rivals'* undoing: there are loads of completely busted heroes right now. Hawkeye is a one-shot headshot for duelists and strategists, while Jeff the Land Shark is able to gobble up full teams of players and launch himself and all of them off the map in one go. Dominant heroes and instakill gimmicks are considered funny and meme-worthy right now in *Marvel Rivals'* honeymoon stage, but soon graduate to annoyances – talking points from which mobs of players will sharpen their pitchforks. Dr Strange's teamkill teleport tactics are already beginning to wear thin – if I have to watch my team helplessly run off the map one more time, I'm going to seriously lose it.

BALANCING ACT

Balancing a roster of heroes is arguably one of the hardest things a live service hero shooter has to do, and *Marvel Rivals* has made things unnecessarily difficult for itself by starting off with so many instead of drip-feeding players. But arguably, NetEase is more concerned with filling *Marvel Rivals* with loads of fun heroes rather than ones that are more balanced straight out of the gate. It's an unorthodox approach, but one that may work out in the long run.

In a similar vein to unbalanced heroes, there is also an uneven number of heroes in each class. The trouble is in a game that requires an even number of roles – usually two vanguards, two duelists and two strategists, or something similar – if you have twice as many duelists

as strategists and vanguards combined, chances are most teams will be made up of duelists.

To make matters worse, the team-up abilities can make an already bad situation painful. There are 15 available right now, all of which give powerful boosts to heroes as long as they have certain heroes in their

team. For example, Guardian Revival has Adam Warlock as the activator hero (the trigger character who buffs teammates) and Star-Lord and Mantis as the parties (secondary heroes who

benefit from power-ups). This team-up sees Adam Warlock give Star-Lord and Mantis rebirth abilities that see them able to resurrect once after dying.

These power-ups are a cool idea, which is pretty fun, but it does put some heroes at a disadvantage. These will change as the seasons progress, so certain heroes won't stay strong forever, but dealing with godly abilities each season may be a bit of a pain. Although I will say the Planet X Pals team-up, which allows Jeff the Land Shark and Rocket Raccoon to ride on Groot's shoulders, is a pretty

fantastic little perk. It's also one that I've made use of whenever there is a Groot on my team because it's a great way to get the enemy Iron Fist off your back.

SELFISH HEROES

The worst matches I've experienced in *Marvel Rivals* have been when no one else is willing to switch off duelist, so we just get completely rolled by the opposing team, which has a balanced composition of vanguard, duelist and strategist. I can play the strategist Rocket Raccoon all I like, but if I'm stuck with a team full of duelists, we're not going to get very far.

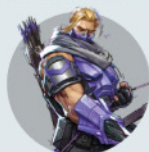
This is something that *Overwatch* has struggled with ever since it merged the roles of offensive and defensive damage per second. Since then, tank and support have been something of an afterthought. More people play duelist/DPS roles, but that's not a reason to fill that class with twice as many heroes as vanguard and strategist.

I thought that this headache was something *Marvel Rivals* would want to avoid from the start by creating classes with a similar number of heroes, but it seems that I was wrong. So, unbalanced team composition will probably stick around as a common issue until something like a role queue is added to the game, or the weak give in and assign themselves to vanguard or strategist.

The balancing issues and iffy team composition will hopefully not weigh *Marvel Rivals* down – my pessimistic outlook could just be a weary symptom of years playing *Overwatch 2*. I really hope the developers manage to even out the playing field a bit more so *Marvel Rivals* can carry on seeing the same kind of success that it has had in its launch week. But for now, at least, I'm going to enjoy the chaos of an unbalanced game while it's still fun and reap the benefits of running around as Hawkeye and getting more picks than anyone else, with the prize being my MVP award at the end of the match. ■

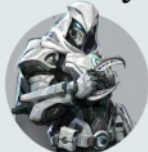
BROKEN HEROES

These characters won't stay strong for long



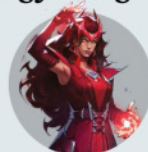
HAWKEYE

With a one-shot headshot alongside a two-shot body shot for strategists and duelists this hero can be deadly.



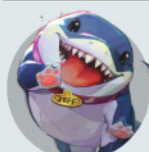
MOON KNIGHT

Siphoning damage from Moon Knight onto enemy players with any aiming required can be tough to beat.



SCARLET WITCH

This hero has an auto-lock ability for her primary fire. The only problem is that the reach of this can be pretty ridiculous.



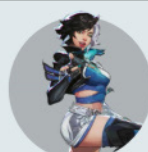
JEFF

I love Jeff the Land Shark, but his ultimate is so powerful. With the right timing, you can get a team wipe.



IRON FIST

Giving a melee fighter autosnap is a recipe for chaos. I enjoy Iron Fist, but the lock on it is too strong right now.



LUNA SNOW

One of the best strategists, her healing output, speed and ability to damage boost makes her a menace.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Marvel Rivals distinguishes itself from other hero shooters but still suffers from the same pitfalls.

73

A LOVEABLE ROGUELIKE

SHIREN THE WANDERER: THE MYSTERY DUNGEON OF SERPENTCOIL ISLAND has it all

By Kerry Brunskill

If the decades-old *Shiren the Wanderer* series is famous for anything it's for being shockingly unforgiving, and *The Mystery Dungeon of Serpentcoil Island* is no exception to that intimidating rule. Life-saving equipment might not appear at all, and traps could be hiding under any and every inch of the floor. Anyone who falls under these harsh conditions loses everything they were carrying and has to start the randomised dungeon crawl all over again.

The odd thing is it doesn't feel that merciless in practice. The first few floors are so keen on getting even complete newcomers up to speed the tutorials don't just cover simple concepts like attacking and diagonal movement, they even go so far as to explain what the heck a 'mystery dungeon' is anyway. Seasoned spelunkers will find these explanations quick to dismiss, the turn-based action interrupted only for the smallest amount of time possible.

Even with all of this help it can be a lot to take in, which is why the Monster Dojo back in the first village behaves like a highly technical fighting game's training room, allowing players of all levels to brush up on the fundamentals or

experiment with new ideas. The pre-made setups teach important tactics, such as luring enemies down a narrow corridor so they can be tackled as one single-file line, and custom sandbox settings allow me to place any monster, trap, or item I've encountered anywhere I like in a blank room.

Just as the game looks like it's coming to a close, it blows wide open

LAB-YRINTH

This learning experience is essential. For all the vast quantities of items and equipment on offer, knowing how to

use these items well is always my most useful resource. Matching swords and shields can resonate with each other, stronger when equipped together than their base stats imply. But raw damage is rarely the most interesting thing any

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An irresistibly tough roguelike packed with charm

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

Spike Chunsoft

PUBLISHER

Spike Chunsoft

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

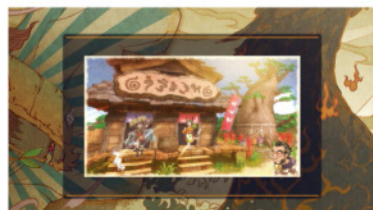
spike-chunsoft.com/games/shiren-the-wanderer-the-mystery-dungeon-of-serpentcoil-island

weapon can do, there's never a 'best in slot' piece of equipment.

This contrast between tough challenges and encouraging assistance is found everywhere. Although the 31 floors standing between the opening sandy shores and the island's summit can feel like an impossible task at first, the entire adventure is broken up into enjoyably small chunks lasting just a few floors each, and between them I'll visit everywhere from secret ninja villages to relaxing hot springs.

A change of scenery often means a change of enemy too, the monsters always drawn from predetermined pools of specific types based on the area I'm in. I may not know where the exit is or what I'll find, but I do at least have some idea of what's going to try and kill me along the way.

Failing and then trying again more often than not progresses one of the game's various plot threads, often involving colourful bands of amusing pirates, secret princesses and cheering friends. These scenes can unlock significant new features, like the ability to magically transform enemies into edible peach buns, or simply introduce a fun new face to



TOP: Achievements unlock fun in-game rewards.



Later areas look appropriately intimidating – if you can reach them.



TOP: Casually dropping stunning location shots is very much *Shiren*'s thing.



FAR RIGHT: The secret ingredient? Monsters.

the game's already generous cast of secondary characters.

With all of that mastered, the dungeon eventually falls – and the story continues on, revealing an avalanche of further challenges and new features as it does so. The new labyrinths are often based around a concept or special item, such as clearing a dungeon in the shortest number of steps or stuffing Shiren so full of delicious onigiri he becomes a sumo-sized whirlwind of destruction. Just as the game looks like it's coming to a close, it actually blows wide open – and into something even more inventive than before, too.

Newcomers will find it has all the information they need to learn the basics at their own pace, and a charming story to help keep spirits high when things start to get tough. Longtime fans can use their skills to break through to the NG+ features in mere minutes, and the game is happy to instantly up the challenge to match. At any and every level, this is a flexible and layered adventure packed with rewards, happy to give players a toolbox filled with absurd abilities and let them invent their own path through the game. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

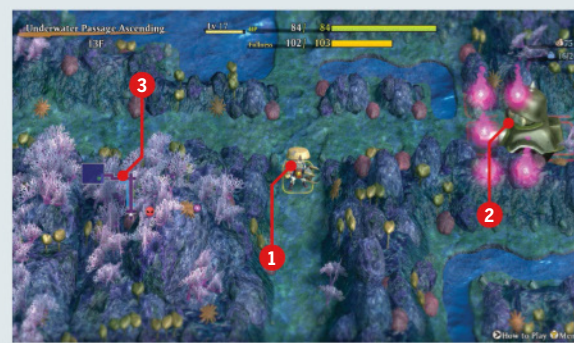
Flexible, fun, and ferocious too, this roguelike has more than enough dungeon-diving for everyone.

89



STAYIN' ALIVE

It's really quite simple – don't die



1 This is Shiren. He's incredibly fragile for an experienced adventurer and doesn't like getting hit in the face with explosives one little bit.

2 This is death in gigantic tank-monster form. RUN AWAY! RUN AWAY!

3 Luckily, the map shows the exit in green, so we know where Shiren needs to go.



When in doubt, fire.



RIGHT: Loots is bountiful and meaningful.

FAR RIGHT: Level ups are for stat-buffs only.

BELOW: Every class has its default weapon, but you can supplement them.



TRUST THE PLAN

HALLS OF TORMENT is a beautiful mash-up of Diablo and Vampire Survivors

By Joshua Wolens

Halls of Torment's most obvious difference from its most obvious inspiration is that it expects you to click to attack. No sir, none of that *Vampire Survivors* laxity here. You'll make inputs to hit enemies and you'll like it. At least for the ten seconds or so before you head into the settings menu and turn it off.

But there's a reason *HoT* starts like that: it's a mission statement. Yes, it's saying, you're one little guy against an army of hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of other little guys, and yes, you're sucking up experience gems by the bucketload, but this isn't that other autobattler. This is something different, more deliberate, more considered, and altogether less slot-machinery than its razzle-dazzle forebear.

A little more thoughtful and conservative than other autobattlers

HELLBOUND

It would be unfair and inaccurate to call *Halls of Torment* derivative. By some mad alchemy, it blends the compulsive loops and endless enemies of *Vampire Survivors* with the gear of *Diablo* and produces something wholly its own.

Despite the writhing masses of sprites, it's a little more thoughtful and conservative than other autobattlers I've played. Your hero has over 20 stats for you to take into account and consider as you massacre your way through dungeons. There's the usual stuff: health, defence, damage, but there's also stuff like piercing, force and a critical hit system composed of multiple substats. Rounds are 30 minutes, so you're not likely to max them all out even if you want to. You have to decide how you're going to spec your little guy over a +1% and +0.2% increments to their myriad stats. And where those kinds of minute increases are barely noticeable in RPGs, the churn of level-ups means they quickly accrue into meaningful differences.

Plus, your buildcrafting is made easier by one of *HoT*'s primary cleavages from *Vampire Survivors*: level ups only give you a chance to buff stats, not to choose new weapons, and you'll get four options to choose from (with opportunities to reroll your options, once you get in far enough). If you want new gear, actual gear, you'll have to slay one of the bosses roaming the levels, but it's not strictly necessary.

Filling all your possible weapon slots is a rarity, and it wouldn't be unheard of to make it all the way

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Vampire Survivors with forethought and a late-'90s aesthetic

EXPECT TO PAY
£5.50

DEVELOPER
Chasing Carrots

PUBLISHER
Chasing Carrots

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2218750/Halls_of_Torment/

though a level without ever getting anything on top of your default, class-based weapon.

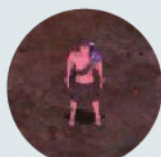
Take my favourite class and probable war criminal: The Exterminator. He's got a flamethrower. Notionally, you could have other weapons, but who cares? My focus when playing him is turning him into a roving, angry Roman candle, melting hordes of enemies into masses of undifferentiated flesh. Is this optimal? Perhaps not. Is this satisfying? Like you wouldn't believe.

That's the handle: the thing that makes *Halls of Torment* different to *Vampire Survivors* and the thing that makes me keep coming back to it is that I feel like I'm following something resembling a plan. *Vampire Survivors* is great, but its experience is one of frantically assembling an ad-hoc toolkit out of whatever its level-up gachas spit at you. Failure is a quirk of the slot machine. In *HoT*? My failure is the failure of my plan or my ability to adhere to it. There's an element of luck, but only an element.

Plus, *Halls of Torment*'s specific aesthetic couldn't be more attuned to my sensibilities as a child of the ARPGs of the late '90s and early 2000s. Give me two honking great orbs representing my health and mana and a protagonist who has no articulating joints in his legs and I'm a happy man, and *HoT* makes me very happy indeed with its lo-fi heroics and diffuse, stygian levels. If I could play this thing on a beige CRT while Rob Zombie screamed in my ears I wouldn't know it wasn't 1999. Actually, wait, I can do that. If anyone needs me, tell them I'm busy for the next... foreseeable future. ■

I NEED A HERO

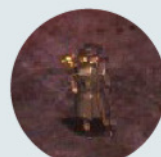
A tasting plate of the Halls' heroes



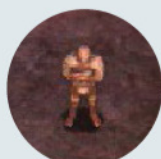
SWORDSMAN
Has sword. Will hit things with it.



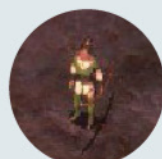
SORCERESS
Shoots lightning. Also floats. Which is more notable?



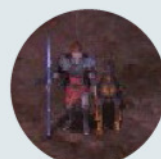
EXTERMINATOR
Has a flamethrower and no compunction about using it.



WARLOCK
Summons ghosts and sends them to murder foes.



ARCHER
Has a bow. Also, arrows.



BEAST HUNTRESS
Has a dog. De facto best class.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Halls of Torment assembles the parts of *Diablo* and *Vampire Survivors* into something brilliantly all its own.

90

You can pick up an audio tour guide, or a miniature black hole.



ART ATTACK

A gallery with a view in **THE ZIUM EXPOSITION**

I can think of few better places to appreciate art than a mountaintop ringed with walkways and containing a photogrammeterised cat, but such are the upsides when you pluck art out of the physical realm and into a goddamn video game. *The Zium Exposition* is an interactive gallery mixing traditionally flat pictures, animated 3D sculptures and, excitingly, more interactive pieces, which whisk you off to separate worlds for more involved, enclosed experiences.

It's a fascinating blending of worlds. In a regular art gallery, you're expected to slow down and to contemplate, to smell the roses without actually putting your nose up against the glass. However, in a game you expect to stick your nose into every nook and cranny, to prod whatever you want to prod, to leap over barriers just to see if you can plummet to your death. *Zium* embraces this, firstly by including artwork that you can physically step inside, or that turns its head to admire you, or that you can scatter without worrying about paying for breakages. A simple but powerful example of this is Pol Clarissou's *Untitled*, in which you step into a holographic protest march in support of Palestine.

A ball of rippling dark energy that you can hold in your hand

Then there are the pieces in which you're an active participant. *Doll's House* by Quinn Spence shrinks you down to the size of a borrower, so you can have a proper gander at a doll's house, while *Dog Castle* by Nomi and Horatiu Roman gives you a janky dog companion that follows you around. There's also a dog playing the piano here – his name is Mr Woofmantic – which gives you a sense of the surreal comedy that pervades much of this exhibition. Grigory Kurosu's *Untitled* is probably my favourite interactive exhibit, even though it doesn't actually do anything. It's a ball of rippling dark energy that you can hold in your hand, or set down wherever you like in the gallery. I

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An interactive first-person exhibition set in a fictional former quarry

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
The Zium Society

PUBLISHER
The Zium Society

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/ZiumExpo

think I like it because it feels like wielding a miniature black hole.

BLACK HOLE FUN

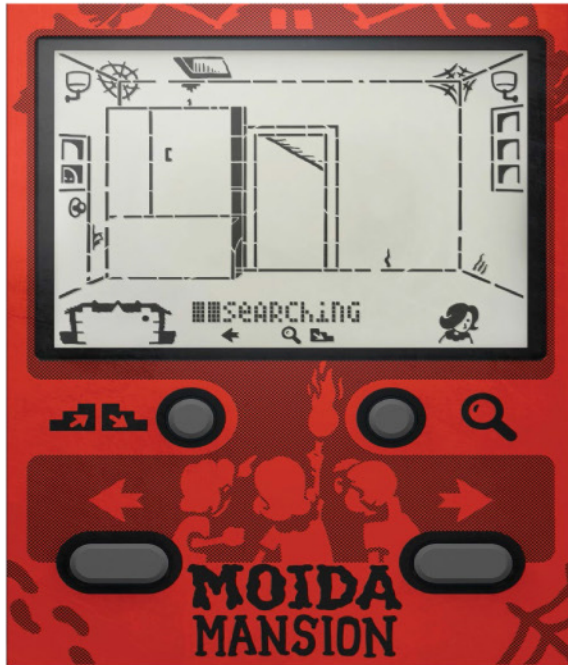
Other pieces in the exhibition transport you to separate environments, such as Michael Berto's *Ebbinghouse*, in which you wander round a field populated by beautifully hand-drawn characters. Jacob Potterfield's science fiction landscape *Barrow Storage* is essentially a solo game of capture the flag. Wonders abound in this digital exhibition that makes the most of its format – but my favourite thing has to be the setting itself. It's half Bond villain lair and half *City 17*: a former mine and quarry that has been transformed into a brutalist structure to house interactive art. When was the last time you visited a museum with its own *Dark Souls*-style shortcut unlock? How preposterous. How exciting. Come on in. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A fascinating space filled with inventive, interactive exhibits. Touching the artwork is very much encouraged here.

82

BELOW: Flashing icons indicate a nearby hiding friend.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Lucas Pope

LINK
bit.ly/MoidaMansion

MOIDA MYSTERY

LCD is back (again) in Lucas Pope's **MOIDA MANSION**

Following on from *LCD, Please* – Lucas Pope's painstakingly authentic LCD demake of his game *Papers, Please* – comes a brand new game from Pope that offers more morally straightforward fun. *Moida Mansion* is a game about exploring a mansion and trying to rescue your friends while a monster stalks you.

My main thought while playing was quite how much I would have enjoyed this, if it had existed as a real LCD game. I played a few back in the day and none were as charming, inventive, or so enjoyable to play as this modern throwback. After entering a randomly generated mansion, you're tasked with looking out for clues and searching every room until you find your friends, while a monster shows up like clockwork to hassle you. When it

does, you have to flit from room to room until it disappears, at which point you can begin the search again.

The monster itself is a hilarious, Scooby Doo-esque creation, popping up after every search in the most ridiculous places, including empty picture frames and peeping round an open door. There's a funny, cosy vibe that manifests in its every element, from the goofy monster sprites to the beeps that are the sound effects.

But this is not a real LCD game, and it's all the better for it, thanks to a procedurally generated mansion that shuffles the layout, clues and hiding places of your friends every time you play. There's even mention of a secret friend that I haven't been able to locate in any of my playthroughs, suggesting this mansion is even more secret-laden than I had initially thought. ■

83

RITE PLACE

Escape a tower in twisty adventure game **THE ANCHORITE**

You've been locked in a tower for the good of the kingdom in this interactive adventure, which wouldn't feel out of place as an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. This is another example of a short, twisty story told in the adventure game format – one of the best trends of recent years.

Your initial goal is not to escape, but initially to do just what is asked of you, by a disembodied voice speaking outside your door. There isn't much going on in your three small rooms. You've been illuminating a manuscript, but sometimes your clothes need washing, or you run out of ink, and all these problems require a bit of thought and a spot of item-combining as in the classic adventure games. Over several days – in fact, over several thousand, but you only play through a few of them

– your peaceful retreat gets less serene, like that time a skeleton appears outside your window.

I'm not going to reveal precisely where the story goes, but I was excited for the twist (it's immediately obvious there's going to be a twist) and satisfied with the ending when it arrived. It's down to the well-paced storytelling, but also the quality of the artwork, which really sells the nature of the shift with its luxurious pixel art and animation.

There are a lot of free games like *The Anchorite*, usually developed over a couple of weeks or a month for a game jam – check out *Tales from The Outer Zone* if you haven't already. I'd rank this somewhere near the top of the heap, if not quite at the apex: still, it's a great entry in a trend that keeps on spitting out memorable stories. ■

78

BELOW: It's another lovely day in the tower.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Beyond Booleans

LINK
bit.ly/TheAnchorite

The Victorian, opium-den equivalent of Hotel Chocolat. Contain yourself, Sherlock.



IDEAL HOLMES

Sombreros and solutions in **SHERLOCK HOLMES: CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS**

Here's my Dragon's Den pitch: AirBnB, but it's all locations from games. High on my list, just after Whiterun's Drunken Huntsman, is Frogwares' rendition of 221B Baker Street: a space where the deductive skills can flourish in comfort. A tumble of Persian rugs, elegant furniture, rustling notes and an invigorating sense of gentlemanly purpose. You can practically smell the crushed velvet and opiates.

I'd even pay money to stay at *Crimes and Punishments*' Evesham station, the site of a missing train in the game's second case, Riddle on the Rails. It's a bleak and weary place, like the last stop in the afterlife for railway operating company executives before they reach hell. It's the end of the line, the train has gone, and all you've got to keep you warm is a dimly-lit stove and a strong sense of justice. And *Crimes and Punishments* is full of locations like this.

Perhaps the thing I love most, especially in comparison to later releases, is just how uncool it all is. Whereas the sequels give Holmes and Watson the angled cheekbones and chiselled external obliques of

smouldering models in a perfume advert, the heroes of *Crimes and Punishments* resemble family butchers who've built up a fractious relationship from a lifetime spent slinging chops. There are jowls, sad eyes, and smile lines. There's an organic pleasantness to it all that recalls staying up past your bedtime to watch a low-stakes detective show with your parents. I don't know quite how it makes me nostalgic for

the era of gas lamps, tuberculosis, urchins and carbolic smoke poisoning, but somehow it does.

ELEMENTARY COOL

It's actually hard to get deduction right in games, just because balancing the line between thoughtful and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The Smell Of Your Pipe-Smoking Great Grandad: The Game

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Frogwares

PUBLISHER
Frogwares

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/241260/Sherlock_Holmes_Crimes_and_Punishments/

frustrating is so difficult. For the most part, *Crimes and Punishments* does an excellent job of replicating the process of gathering clues, making assumptions, and dusting the architraves in Sherlock's mind palace. I also love that it leaves enough room for you to make idiotic mistakes, leading you to entirely the wrong conclusions, in a supremely un-Sherlocky way. The visual representation of these elements is fun too: you'll rarely feel more like Sherlock Holmes than when you're scanning potential suspects in search of muddled cuffs, worn heels, or secret signs they might be an alcoholic. Not all of it works so well – the moment in which the smell of cigars coalesce into a vast, glowing sombrero could perhaps have been handled with greater subtlety – but the lack of urgency means this is a game you can graze on, possibly while reclining on a chaise longue. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Crimes and Punishments is a low-impact, high enjoyment treat which has rarely been bettered by the sequels.

81

BELOW: Everyone felt anxious after the PC Gamer Christmas party.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Color Gray Games

PUBLISHER
Playstack

AU MY GOD

No secrets are safe in **THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL**

Some detectives are driven by a rigid sense of morality: order must be restored, criminals punished, justice served. In contrast, I'm apparently driven by a sense of 'let me see what weird shit is inside your pockets'. It's a righteous bonus if any crimes get solved in the process.

Curse of the Golden Idol, for me, is as much about uncovering all those dark personal secrets as it is about deductive reasoning. It's a game that makes me want to delete all the DMs from my phone and throw away any incriminating receipts, just in case I spontaneously combust and an inquisitive detective has to piece together all the shameful aspects of my life. Morsels of information can be plucked from the still-warm pockets of victims while the harpoons are still sticking out of

them. You collect words and motives and places, like a soup of suspects and murder weapons, then piece together what happened via deduction and educated guesswork. Part of this involves reading everything you can find, but it also calls for more inventive deduction: some cases require you to survey the landscape to work out where crimes took place, or recreate fractured narratives from partial information. It's clever enough that you feel capable when it goes well, but rarely so obtuse it's annoying. The presentation just adds to the sense of unsettling grotesquerie: it's part '90s Sierra game, part *Grand Guignol* fever dream. The result is a weird, swirling sense of feeling extremely pleased with myself, and also like I need to play it with a bottle of hand sanitiser nearby. ■

90

CROSSING LINES

Zips, trips, and calls in **428: SHIBUYA SCRAMBLE**

There's a certain type of humour that Japanese games manage which often defies the rules of tone and decency. "Yes, there has been a kidnapping, and lives are in danger, but relax! There's still time to make jokes about my coworker's screensaver." You're not being flippant; just helping break the tension.

Instead of ruining the sense of immersion, the often erratic tone of *428: Shibuya Scramble* actually helps draw you in. You start to feel like you know the characters, and however odd they are, the narrative dissonance gradually fades into the background over the course of 30 or so hours. It's surprising that it's as effective as it is: despite some cinematic sequences and the use of real actors, 90% of the game is a simple visual novel, but it speaks the

power of ambiguity and imagination. Yes, you will have to read; no, it isn't a bad thing. It's similar to the *Yakuza* series in that the moments of jaunty weirdness can sit alongside murder and organised crime, and it still feels strangely comfortable and compelling. Perhaps I shouldn't be rooting for a plucky detective who can afford a Breitling watch despite being so inept that he has to consult his 'Dick Diary' in order to make rational decisions, but here we are. It helps that you have some agency over the story, and it's so twisted, weird and specific to have the power to genuinely surprise. There are narrative paths that feel well trodden, but there are also terrible undercover costumes and a character trapped inside a mascot suit, making this the only game to combine zipper failure with antiviral drug trials. ■

75

BELOW: I don't know why, but I feel reluctant to take his advice.



NEED TO KNOW

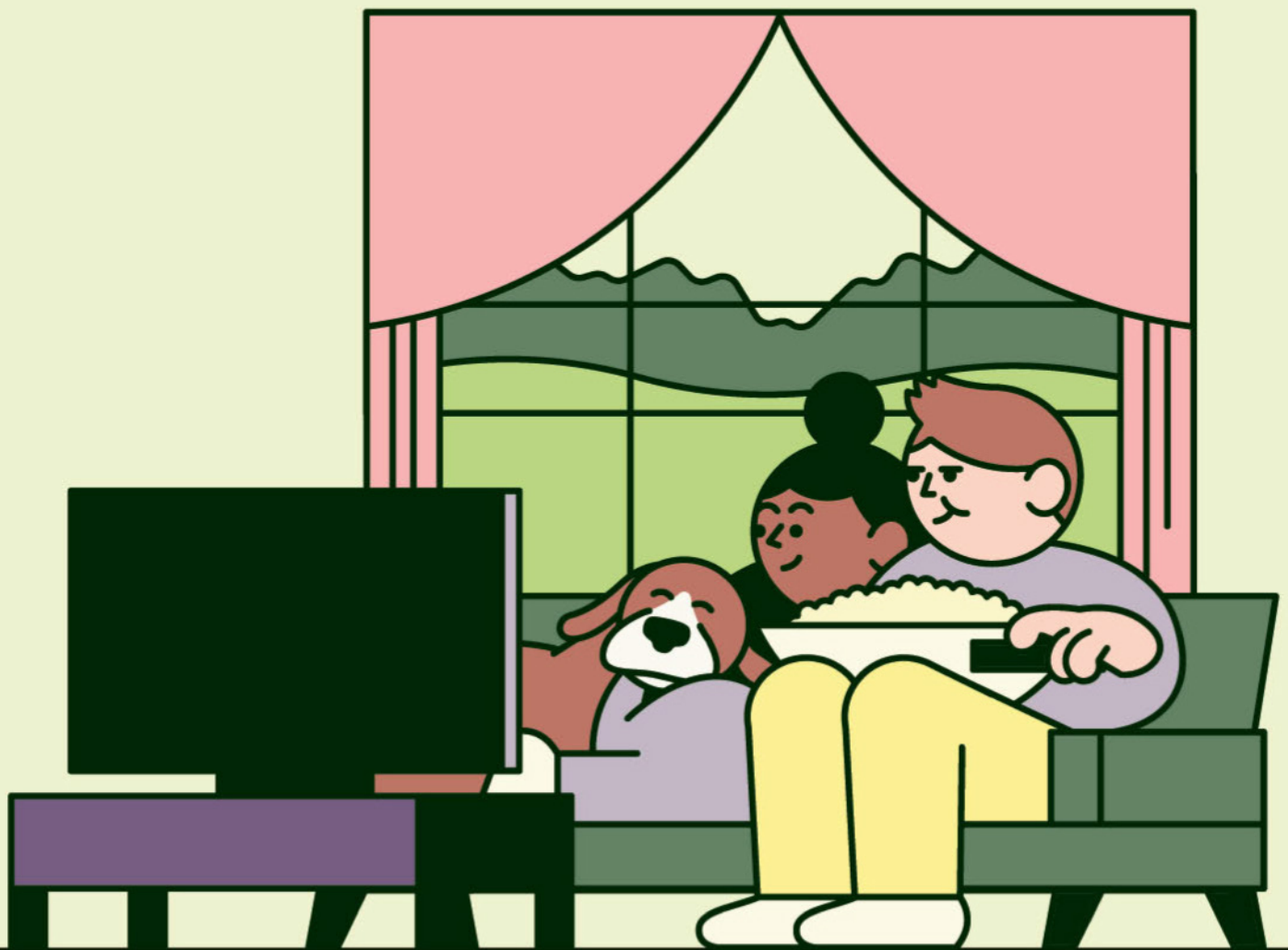
EXPECT TO PAY
£8

DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft

PUBLISHER
Spike Chunsoft

SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

Discover cover options for car, home and travel insurance, plus broadband and more.



GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.go.compare).

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST

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The rise and fall of the joystick, the PC's forgotten peripheral.



The humble controller is easily overlooked by a PC gamer. We're too distracted by our light-up keyboards and ultralight mice. But it's a good time to start paying attention to. There are a range of new technologies vying to change controllers forever, and the expectation of what's good is changing constantly.

Take the Hall effect, for example. This is popular among gaming keyboards but has become one of the most requested features for controllers over the past couple of years – a request that many manufacturers are keen to meet. Then, when you think the dust has settled, along come TMR sticks that claim to be even better.

The best things about the controller market, however, are the prices. Unlike gaming keyboards and mice, the controller market is ruled by two mass-produced beasts from Microsoft and Sony. Third-party manufacturers are in a constant battle to bring down prices to meet them and win over potential customers that often prefer to stick to what they know. But as you'll see from our testing, you can get a whole lot more for your money.



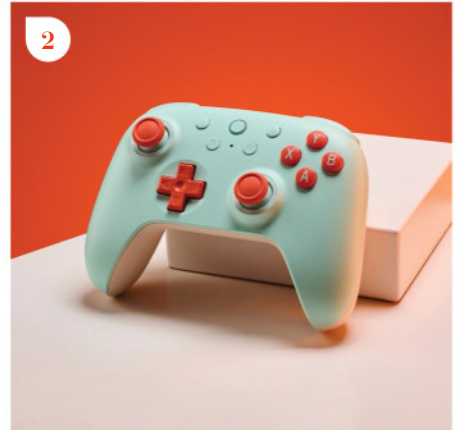
GROUP TEST

CONTROLLERS

It's a fiercely competitive market out there for controllers, and it's only just getting started

By Jacob Ridley





V3 Pro

WOLVERINE £200

Better than ever

1 Razer has been trying to grab a slice of the premium controller market for years. You can't blame it for trying – Microsoft has had the market locked down with the illustrious Elite. Yet even the Xbox creator might be beaten at its own game by this pad.

The V3 Pro is off to a good start for the inclusion of Hall effect sticks. These promise a drift-free existence for the duration of their usage. That really matters when you're looking to spend triple-digits on a controller – which you absolutely will be with the V3 Pro. This controller may be expensive but it has a tank-like build and

wonderfully clicky switches to justify the cost. The face switches give this controller a tactile edge that speaks to my nerdy soul. They are a little loud for late-night gaming – you're sure to annoy anyone in close proximity. Click, clack, click, clack. The V3 Pro goes one further with Mouse Click rear paddles and triggers. Yep, even the triggers are clicky if you want them to be. Though that's why this controller speaks to the pros, and to us mere mortals too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Hall effect
- Comfortable
- Snappy switches

SPECS WEIGHT: 281 G / CONNECTIVITY: XBOX WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / STICK TYPE: HALL EFFECT

Ultimate 2C Wireless

8BITDO £25

Budget hero

2 Budget takes on a new meaning with the 8BitDo Ultimate 2C. It feels nothing like the cheap pads of the past and much more like a premium model, and yet still it's more affordable than the Xbox Core Wireless Controller. Since when did budget controllers come with cream of the crop Hall effect sticks? They do now. The Ultimate 2C has two of them in a non-symmetrical layout, ergo the Xbox way, and even the triggers are Hall effect for maximum magnetic action. These all feel great to use, too, and we'd even rate the face buttons better than the Xbox

Core controller's. There are two extra shoulder bumpers too.

The overall feel of the 8BitDo is more plasticky than Microsoft's main pad. The D-pad is a little less luxurious, too, though it's really not far off to be honest. As PC users, we also benefit from 8BitDo's standard 2.4 GHz connection over a dongle and Bluetooth as a backup, which means no extra dongles to take up space or whittle down your bank account. Good stuff.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Hall effect
- Wireless
- Extra buttons

SPECS WEIGHT: 200 G / CONNECTIVITY: 2.4 GHZ, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / STICK TYPE: HALL EFFECT

WILDLY CUSTOMISABLE THANKS TO A HEAP OF SHORTCUT BUTTONS



GROUP TEST

Atom

CKRD £15

Adorable

3 The CKRD isn't going to replace your keyboard and mouse in most games. It's a bit too niche for that. Though it is a cleverly compact throwback to a time when controllers didn't have analogue sticks and double denim was more acceptable to wear in public. With just a D-pad, four shoulder buttons, and your usual array of face buttons, you are limited to what you can play with the CKRD Atom. Though to judge it on this alone would be a mistake. After all, it's cute. Its deceptively tiny form factor means it's portable in such a way that it wouldn't be too weird to carry around in a bag with you at

all times. You could store it in your jeans pocket, or perhaps your jeans jacket pocket.

It connects over Bluetooth, which is a higher latency connection than dedicated wireless, though the battery lasts a good ten hours or so. A USB Type-C cable comes to the rescue for truly lighting-fast play, and there's no faff setting this controller up either. More of a gaming accessory than a serious controller, we still had a blast playing 2D platformers on this.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Cute
- Wireless
- Good battery

SPECS WEIGHT: 90 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** NO STICKS

Envision Pro

SCUF £180

Missing out

4 The Scuf Envision Pro is a lovely controller but in desperate need of a version two. Let's start with the positives, namely a wonderful build quality with an almost soft-touch finish. It oozes quality, figuratively, so far it's been entirely ooze-free in testing. It's also wildly customisable thanks to a heap of shortcut buttons running beneath the analogue sticks. Though you will need iCUE to get the most out of it.

The requirement for some form of iCUE integration is a bit of frustration. I'm all up for my controller having lots of programmable bells and whistles, but when I first got this

controller it wasn't possible to even use it without iCUE installed on my PC. You can set it up to function with your preferences baked into the hardware, though you still have to run through iCUE for the initial set-up.

Then there's the lack of Hall effect. Hall effect isn't everything, but on a controller that costs this much and is a modern design it feels like a big miss. Look at the 8BitDo: Hall effect for a fraction of the price of the Scuf. The Scuf is far superior in many ways.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great feel
- Lots of customisation
- No Hall effect

SPECS WEIGHT: 241 · 285 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** POTENTIOMETER



GROUP TEST

**A FANTASTIC
CONTROLLER FOR
THE MONEY**



MAGNETIC STICKS EXPLAINED

Analogue sticks traditionally use something called a potentiometer to measure how far a stick moves around in use. These potentiometers are cheap, efficient, and pretty accurate, until they're not. That's the big downside: they eventually wear out, leading to malfunctioning known commonly as stick drift. That's where magnets come to save the day.

Hall effect sticks have fewer parts touching one another, which extends their lifespan. They're much less prone to issues such as stick drift, as it's possible to finely tune their dead zone for optimal performance without leaving large margins in case something should go wrong.

Then there's TMR (tunnel magnetoresistance): a newer technology for controllers that claims both the benefits of Hall effect and lower power demands. It's also said to be more consistent. Though it still has a way to go before it's used widely.

Core Wireless Controller

XBOX £50

Standard bearer

5 The Xbox Core Wireless Controller is the best thing about an Xbox in 2024. I'm joking... mostly. It's a fantastic controller for the money, helped along by Microsoft's might and the economies of scale. How can some ma and pa controller company compete? The Xbox pad has a subtly textured finish, responsive sticks, excellent triggers, and it works a treat on PC out of the box. It uses AA batteries, which some won't like, but if you buy a pack of rechargeable batteries you can save on waste in a couple of ways: the batteries last longer and the controller won't need

completely replacing when the batteries are dead for good. The biggest downside is the specialised Xbox Wireless dongle. It's like any other 2.4 GHz connection dongle, except Microsoft makes you pay extra for it rather than bundling it in the box. It's much better to play over 2.4 GHz for the lowest latency, though you can always opt for Bluetooth if you want to save the cash. Though if you're planning on that, why not just buy a better budget pad from the get-go?

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great value
- Solid build
- Extra dongle required

SPECS WEIGHT: 280 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ (WITH DONGLE), USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** POTENTIOMETER

Cyclone 2

GAMESIR £56

All the stuff

6 The Gamesir Cyclone 2 comes with TMR sticks. That stands for tunnel magnetoresistance. Much like traditional Hall effect sticks they harness the power of magnets for a more reliable function, no stick drift and a longer life. Though it's also said that TMR is more efficient and consistent than Hall effect. All of which is good news for a controller biz looking for the Next Big Thing.

Though the GameSir isn't just a TMR controller. It also has Hall effect triggers – it's a bit of a hybrid. That means it's supremely snappy and customisable, with a switch on

the rear to adjust the triggers into 'hair trigger' mode.

The Cyclone 2 is just so gosh darned affordable that it makes you wonder about controllers that have half the features for the same money. It even has a charging stand. Admittedly, the Gamesir has some cheaper-looking materials to it, but that's somewhat excusable with the entire package taken into account. By any rate, I think we'll see more TMR controllers headed our way in the future.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- TMR sticks
- Gyro
- Rear buttons

SPECS WEIGHT: 299 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** TMR



GREEN AI'D MONSTER

Jensen Huang says AI's essential for graphics. What does that mean for gamers?

Yes, you're sick of seeing those two particular characters in print. Everyone is, at this point. Nevertheless, Nvidia's increasing focus on artificial intelligence bears some scrutiny. Because when the company that's previously held an historic stranglehold on the computer graphics market suddenly sees all its profits coming from elsewhere, there are going to be consequences.

Asked which use case of AI excited him the most at the Goldman Sachs Communacopia + Technology Conference in San Francisco earlier this year, Nvidia boss Jensen Huang told the audience it was computer graphics.

"We can't do computer graphics any more without artificial intelligence," he said. "We compute one pixel, we infer the other 32. I mean, it's incredible... And so we hallucinate, if you will, the other 32, and it looks temporally stable, it looks photorealistic, and the image quality is incredible, the performance is incredible."

Of course, he would say that. Despite record profits from hardware sales used to build AI data centres accounting for the majority of Nvidia's business this financial year, it is still a company whose foundations are in computer graphics. It's a bit like asking an optician why he's excited about AI and being surprised when he tells you it's making glasses.

But Huang's words are all the more meaningful, because they're backed up by years of action on Nvidia's part. The most exciting developments to come out of the company over the last decade have all either been powered by neural network AI, or require it to render at an acceptable performance level. Huang's words ring true.

OFF THE SCALE

What's especially significant about them is that they imply AI upscaling is, and will continue to be, a necessity as we reach higher fidelity levels. It's not like path tracing, a mathematical basis for modelling more accurate light reflection and refraction so that we see more immersive worlds and developers are empowered to devise new experiences within them. It's the engine room, building the pixels that convey techniques like path tracing.

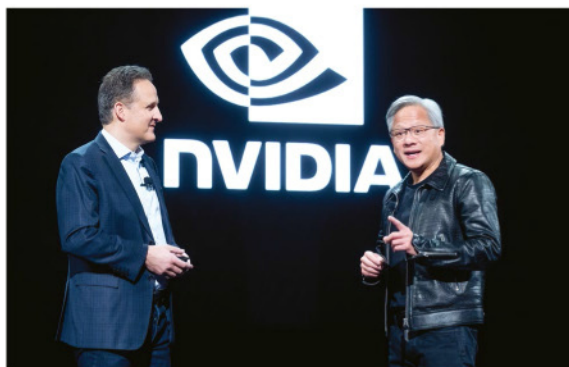
There's good and bad in there. DLSS 3.5's frame generation is a fine example of how AI's being made use of for what feels almost like magical performance boosts in our games, and DLSS resolution upscaling is already starting to feel as everyday as anti-aliasing, three GPU generations into its lifespan.

But dangers lurk here. Dangers like over-reliance, as we saw with titles like *Remnant 2* in recent memory, whose recommended specs assumed the user would be using upscaling in order to reach smooth performance levels. That



\$3.579 trillion

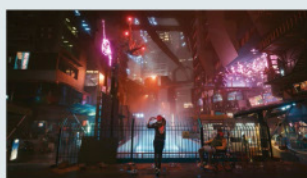
Nvidia's market value has been a wild ride. Even during the crypto mining booms of 2019 and 2021. Its \$3.5 trillion market cap is the result of a tech industry gold rush for AI hardware, and Jensen Huang's outfit was ideally positioned to capitalise on it. Its stock value has risen 195% in the space of one year, and the performance of that stock accounts for 25% of the entire S&P 500's gain for the year.



FAR LEFT: Jensen Huang reckons the most exciting use of AI is in computer graphics. Fancy that, eh?

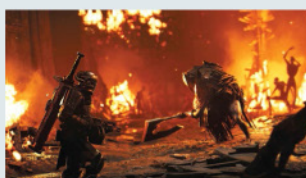
LEFT: At least Intel's increasingly impressive XeSS gives us some options about how we upscale.

LEAN ON ME *Four games you already rely on upscaling for*



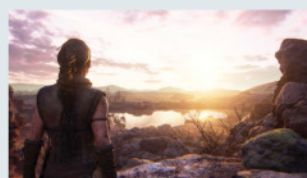
CYBERPUNK 2077

Let's all finally come clean. None of us are rendering this behemoth natively at 4K.



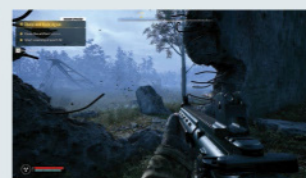
REMNANT 2

You cheeky sci-fi Soulslike, you, basing your specs on upscaling. Also: too hard.



HELLBLADE II

There's no way to turn off the upscaler in Senua's latest harrowing journey.



STALKER 2

Love the look, love the atmosphere, love the accomplishment. Hate the native framerates.

creates a real divide between users equipped with GPU upscaling solutions and those who aren't. As of Steam's November 2024 hardware survey, the fourth-most used card on the platform is the GeForce GTX 1650, so these aren't edge cases we're talking about who might feel the pinch should more titles start to rely on upscaling in order to hit acceptable framerates.

There's also outright fidelity to consider. However impressive AI frame generation and upscaling are, the images they produce do differ in quality to the equivalent natively rendered image. Perhaps those differences will become so minute that they're imperceptible to the naked eye in time, like 240Hz vs 320Hz refresh rates or the release of a new EA Sports title. But only perhaps.

DIE-R STRAITS

Trouble is, to do it all natively on-die, manufacturers like Nvidia, AMD, Intel et al would need to force the Moore's Law graph back to that linear diagonal line. Given that it's been slowing since 2002, and that each new die shrink costs those manufacturers a hefty chunk in manufacturing and die yields, there's very little incentive for them to pour money into forcing that reality to manifest itself. And even less so now that they can use AI tools to fake it.

Nvidia has DLSS. Intel has XeSS. AMD has FSR and FMF. Microsoft's Auto Super Resolution joined the chat too, all offering variations on the same upscaling and frame-gen solutions that we're told we'll increasingly rely on. They each have their own pros and cons in specific use cases, and encouragingly, Nvidia's rivals don't seem as keen on

ringfencing their AI solutions for their own hardware. If we must employ upscaling to reach a playable framerate, it's important that we'll at least have a choice of upscaling options to contrast and compare.

But having that suite of solutions depends, just like the effectiveness of those solutions, on per-game implementation. Intel's second-gen XeSS is a mighty impressive bit of code, surpassing AMD's option and going toe-to-toe with DLSS in some situations, but at present it's hardly ubiquitous in each new game's graphics options menu.

It takes a lot of talented, busy people a lot of time to ensure the game, hardware and AI-driven software layer all work in harmony. In the end, it comes down to how much developers lean on these tools. If we need to use upscaling to hit a stable 120fps at 4K, that feels like an acceptable way to hit what's always been a challenging benchmark through native rendering. If, however, we start to see

upscaling become mandatory to hit 1080p60 on a mid-range card, that's a different matter.

Reasons to be sanguine? Well, for as long as graphics card manufacturers are interested in selling new cards, they need to keep devising ways to improve performance on-die. We might have eaten up the DLSS 3.5 ringfencing, but with Nvidia's competitors offering hardware-agnostic options that continue to edge closer in terms of the final image, that nonsense won't fly for much longer. New GPU models need to use the silicon to offer us better performance, otherwise we might as well sell our RTX 4090s, dig out our GTX 970s again and let upscaling do the rest. ■

Phil Iwanik

BUILDING THE PIXELS THAT CONVEY TECHNIQUES LIKE PATH TRACING

TRIGGER HAPPY PC

The rise and fall of the joystick

How our hands have set in place over time. Our muscles and tendons have grown around the WASD keys like the roots of an old tree, permanently warped into the recesses, little finger instinctively hovering over left shift. The same goes for our controllers, a presence once viewed with suspicion on our desks as an interloper from console shores, but now an essential, instinctual way to reach into a game and impose your will on it.

But there was a time when that domain, the territory where we rested our digits, was up for grabs. Even before mouselook, and the days of warring keyboard control layouts, one peripheral was at the centre of many a setup, and made you feel like a fighter pilot.

There's no consensus on who first coined the term 'joystick', but you can find instances of it as far back as 1909 in the diaries of pilots describing the instruments at their flight schools. No mention of them trying to get one working with *Doom*, though. By 1926 a two-axis joystick had been patented by one CB Mirick, with the intended usage of piloting remote aircraft.

AXIS POWERS

It would be a few more decades before they started turning up in electronic games, though, not least because it would also be a few more decades until electronic games existed. By 1969 Sega had developed a joystick with a trigger to use with arcade game *Missile*, but the Japanese company's hardware owed something to Ralph H Baer, who'd been tinkering with joystick game controllers since 1967. Baer would have his day, though – in 1972 he brought the world's first games console to market. The Magnavox Odyssey cost an eye-watering \$99.95 at the time, equivalent to around \$730 in current money, and among three types of controllers available for it was our humble joystick.

**THE MAGNAVOX
ODYSSEY COST
AN EYE-WATERING
\$99.95 AT THE TIME**

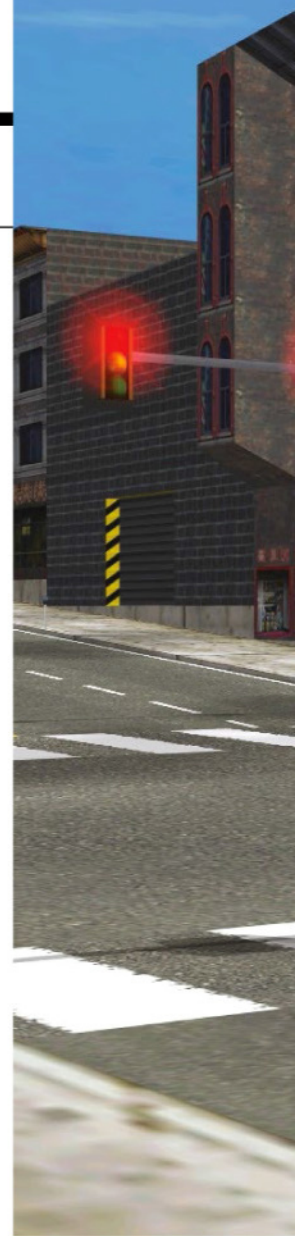
It's IBM's turn to take a bow next on this historical roll call, because it's credited with the first PC-compatible gaming joystick in 1981. Using the IBM PC's DA-15 port, big blue brought a \$55 optional expansion card to market that let you plug in a two-axis, two-button peripheral in beautiful beige and black, with satisfyingly important-looking red buttons.

It's worth pausing to think about what 'games' were during this era. Before Nintendo and Sega brought home consoles truly into the mainstream, gaming at home wasn't much different to gaming in an arcade. While some maverick developers were coding deeper, longform experiences for the Amiga and its ilk, and text adventures were rising in the underground, to most people gaming meant *Pong*, *Pac-Man*, or *Pitfall!*. A joystick was the perfect way to interact with an experience like that. And crucially, there was nothing like the modern long tail of niche genres and enthusiasts to cater for. So many

genres in the modern landscape had yet to be devised, and in the arcade-or-GTFO landscape of the early 1980s, it was easy for the joystick to assume the throne as our de facto gaming control method. That began to shift from the mid-1980s into the '90s, when Sega and Nintendo's stratospherically, Earth-swallowingly popular consoles arrived with gamepads in the box, not a joystick.

Simultaneously, more of us were buying home computers with keyboards and mice supplied. The imperative to go out and buy a separate peripheral for games was being eroded.

But joysticks would fight back, in a new form. Through the 1990s, as new genres were founded every few minutes, manufacturers like Logitech, Microsoft, Thrustmaster and Saitek embraced the peripherals' new potential as a niche controller for niche experiences. It might not make *Escape from Monkey Island* more fun, but if you're playing a flight sim, a space combat game, or one of those newfangled first-person shooters, have we ever got a phallic lump of plastic to suit your needs.



PHIL IWANIUK

If anyone's looking for a semi-functional Microsoft Sidewinder Pro, roaming freelancer Phil Iwaniuk will do you a great deal. The port pins are only slightly bent.

ART OF THE DEAL *The best uses of a joystick through PC gaming history*



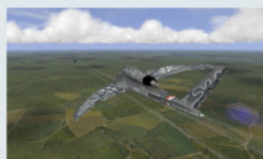
FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX, 1991

The height of racing simulation in the DOS era, and it felt properly magical with a joystick.



DESCENT, 1995

An FPS played from inside a spaceship. There are no other peripherals on the planet that can do that experience justice.



IL-2 STURMOVIK, 2001

A legendary flight sim that equally legendary PCG alumnus Tim Stone mentioned in every article for at least a decade.



ELITE DANGEROUS, 2014

Docking your ship in Frontier's 1:1 scale virtual Milky Way is, surprisingly, one of life's great joys.



HOTAS TO GO

There was one more innovation that would extend the joystick's time in the sun. In 1997, Immersion Corporation developed a joystick with haptic force feedback, a feature quickly proliferated by all the aforementioned big names.

But the shift towards mouse and keyboard gaming was impossible to counter. Mice were getting comfier, more precise, and some were even being designed with gaming in mind. Developers were taking cues from early esports players like the way *Quake* supremo Dennis 'Thresh' Fong remapped his controls. It felt better and better to stick with the hardware and mappings right in front of us, to the extent that even those of us who had joysticks watched them gather dust.

Fortunately, they exist today to serve the experiences where they make sense. Flight sims, space flight sims and retro gaming. It might not be your first thought to reach for one when id Software's next game drops, But such is the nature of PC gaming, a broad church of almost infinite experiences, that an icon of gaming past still has its place on our desktop. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: *Midtown Madness* arrived just before force feedback wheels became affordable. Ergo: WASD or stick.

BELOW: Once it sat at the centre of any gaming setup. Now it sits in a museum.



THE BUILD

Air cooled to perfection

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £1,767

1

COOLER



Dark Rock 5

BeQuiet! **£63**

Who said air cooling was over? Not I. This BeQuiet! Dark Rock 5 dispels any rumours of air cooling's demise – it still has what it takes to keep a modern Intel CPU chilly.

It can't just be me that finds air coolers just undeniably satisfying, right? Look at this thing, it's hefty.

There are tubes, and fins, and fans, and screws. I might be romanticising a block of metal, but it does the job and looks fantastic doing it. In my testing, during games, it never let the CPU reach over 65°C. In more demanding tests, ie Cinebench 2024, it let the 245K reach 76°C.

2

CASE



Shadow Base 800 FX

BeQuiet! **£197**

This BeQuiet! beauty was extremely easy to build into, with room under the PSU shroud.

3

GRAPHICS CARD



Radeon RX 7900 XT

AMD **£630**

I wanted to give AMD's RX 7000-series one last hurrah. Also these cards are frequently discounted now.

4

PROCESSOR



Core Ultra 5 245K

Intel **£286**

For an air-cooled PC, Intel's latest CPU series is a good fit. They're easier on power than previous chips, too.

5

MEMORY



Vengeance RGB DDR5-6600 32 GB

Corsair **£150**

A speedy kit of DDR5 won't cost you an arm and a leg any more.

6

SSD



P44 Pro 1 TB

Solidigm **£105**

Where performance meets practicality. It's nothing special, but even that means 7,000 MB/s transfers.

7

POWER SUPPLY



MAG A850GL PCIE5

MSI **£81**

A modern, modular PSU that fits easily into the cavernous rear of this BeQuiet! Case. You could probably fit two in here.

8

MOTHERBOARD



Z890 Steel Legend WiFi

ASRock **£255**

Since we're opting for an Arrow Lake chip, I need a solid motherboard with lots of features but a low price.

9

FANS



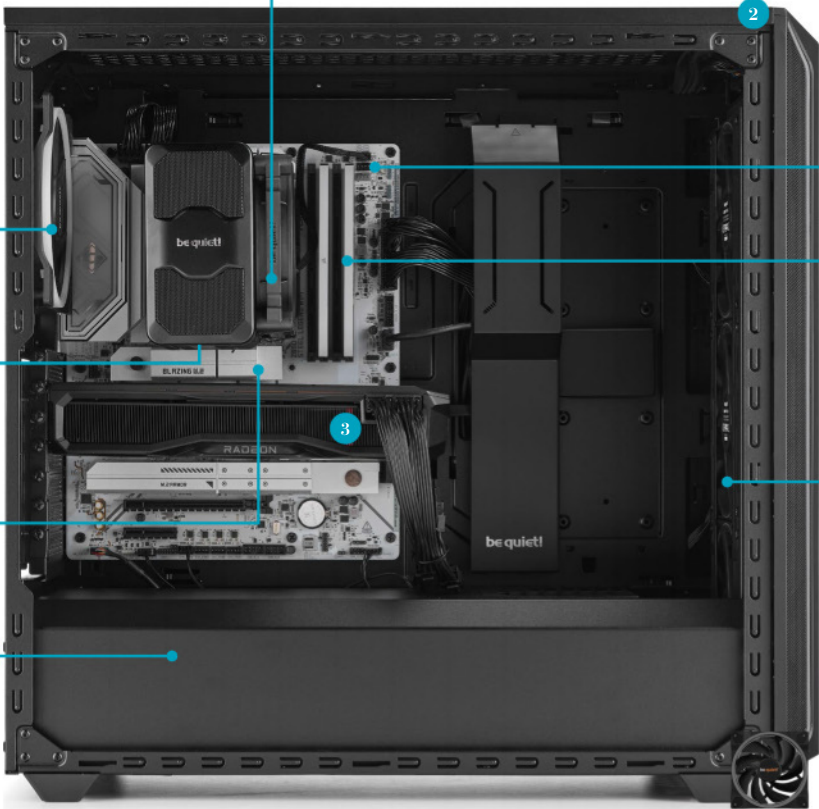
Light Wings 140 mm

BeQuiet! **Included with case**

These fans are included with the case, so I didn't choose them, but I might have, as they are so quiet.

9

9



PC GAMER 103

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,017

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		RM650 80 Plus Corsair £80 A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £60 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £50 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,567

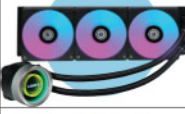
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £400 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £70 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£6,225

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £450 The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £2,000 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there... for now.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £270 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“The more you find out about your companions, the worse it gets”

I've finally boarded the Tulpar spaceship and tried out **MOUTHWASHING**

I was told that the best way to approach Wrong Organ's first-person retro-horror game

Mouthwashing was to know absolutely nothing about it. Sadly, despite my best efforts, I was unable to avoid some small tidbits of information. This didn't ruin my experience, but it did rob me of some amazing plot twists.

Mouthwashing's nonlinear story means that you begin in the middle of the narrative, at a critical turning point, when everything begins to go wrong. Sitting in the cockpit of the Tulpar, a cargo spaceship, an alert pops up on the screen telling me to shift course right to avoid an oncoming asteroid, but I turn left straight into the massive space rock. There's yelling, fire, and a ton

ELIE GOULD



THIS MONTH
Learned the difference between left and right.

ALSO PLAYED
Overwatch 2,
Deadlock, *Valorant*

of protective foam, which patches up all the holes I've put in the hull – not my finest moment.

YES, THIS HURTS

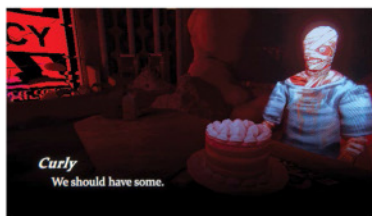
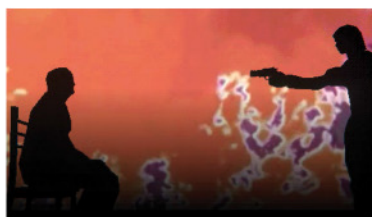
After this, the narrative flips between before and after the crash. Prior to the accident, you play as Captain Curly and slowly discover why and how your usually sturdy ship and crew crumbled beneath you. After the crash, you change roles to play vice-captain Jimmy, who's tasked with keeping the ship and crew in one piece while also reflecting on

TOP: Curly hooked up to pipes and X-ray machines.

what went wrong in the lead-up to the crash. Piecing this puzzle together takes most of the two-and-a-half hours of game time, but it's certainly worth the wait.

Mouthwashing is something of a masterclass in how to tell a scary story. Instead of relying on cheap jump scares or constant chase scenes and bloody fights, it uses its narrative structure to make you feel uneasy and keep you in the dark. I've always thought that the worst part of horror games is the unknown. Maybe you don't know what monster is chasing you, or you're unsure of where you are. But in *Mouthwashing*, you don't

**SOMETHING OF A
MASTERCLASS IN HOW
TO TELL A SCARY STORY**



know who to trust or what the truth is. Not being able to trust the people you're stuck with on a broken spaceship endlessly floating through a void is chilling, and the more you find out about your companions, the worse it gets.

I was so sure that when everything went sideways, the person I'd have to be most wary of was Swansea – an engineer with a bad drinking problem and an even worse temper. Despite staying grumpy throughout most of the story, you ultimately find out that he's not the monster you thought he was. No, he's just a broken man who's had a hard life and regrets failing to protect the people who deserve it, like Anya and his apprentice Daisuke, but not you – you don't deserve protection.

By the end, it becomes clear that the character you play, Jimmy, is the real antagonist of this horror story. All your running around post-crash trying to fix everything is some deluded attempt to wash your hands of trying to kill yourself and your crew during a temper tantrum. It's a neat crescendo to finish on and made all the better, considering the last few moments in *Mouthwashing* involve you getting front-row seats to Jimmy's comeuppance. ■

Indy spotting the latest issue of PC Gamer.



“Where’s that blasted cat?!”

Feline fine in **INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Punched Blackshirts,
whipped lemons.

ALSO PLAYED
STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl,
Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

The cat I’ve been looking for is tantalisingly close. I’ve been on its trail for ages and, if I can only go eyes-on with it, then I’m going to really take Indy’s adventure to the next level. No, I’m not talking about the main plot MacGuffin that kickstarts a globe-trotting romp in *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, one where he needs to track down a stolen cat mummy, but instead the cutesy side-quest in the game’s Vatican hub world where you need to find and photograph cats. Yes, Indy has 100 percent got his priorities straight here.

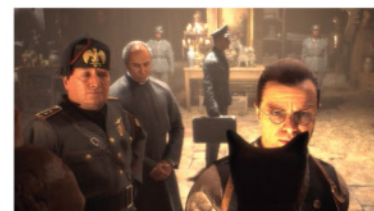
I know the cat is close as I can hear its plaintive meowing, which at this stage of frustrated non-finding is definitely taunting Indy. I literally find myself saying, “Where’s that blasted cat?!” as I search. I’ve only got a few cats left to photograph, though, and when a game gives me this sort of ‘hey buddy, why don’t you take a break from the hard work of questing with some of this chilled-out collect ‘em up fayre’, I’ve got a tendency to lap it up. I mean, look, there’s only so

much fist fighting in the Blackshirts’ underground boxing club that a middle-aged man like me/Indy can do without a break, OK?

CAMERA OBSCURA

And photographing cats in the bright confines of the Vatican is a nice break from chasing Indy’s MacGuffin here, as so far it has taken me and my fellow companion on this grand adventure, Gina Lombardi, into a ton of dark rooms. Dark rooms for dark deeds, sure, but also dark rooms for some great old-fashioned puzzle solving. In chasing this cat mummy, Indy sure is getting the most on-brand cerebral and physical workout he’s had since *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Pendulums swing, levers clunk into place when pulled, chains rattle as gates and more ascend and descend, crumbling platforms are jumped between, and whips are swung on through stone-clad corridors, tombs and chambers. This is *Indiana Jones* done 100 percent right.

Oh, and by the way, I do end up finding that cat, but it’s not easy. The frisky feline is sat right up high on some Vatican roof tiles, which Indy has to climb up to. Thanks! ■



“You help the necromancer come to terms with his mortality”

The **DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD** defender has logged on

The YouTube algorithm keeps threatening me with videos about how the new *Dragon Age* is a crime against gamers. I haven't watched any of them, but my recommendations still overflow. However, I've enjoyed most of my time with the game.

Not all of it, of course. Like too many BioWare RPGs, *Veilguard* frontloads its worst companions. This time the Carth Onasi you suffer before you're allowed to hang out with the cool kids is Neve, a detective whose schtick is being Sherlock Holmes without deductive grandstanding, drug addiction, or the ability to put emphasis on words. It didn't take long before I met more memorable companions, though – a Grey Warden griffin dad, a surly qunari hyper-focused on dragons, and a necromancer who acts like Vincent Price hosting *The Muppet Show*.

The locations open up too, more than I was expecting. BioWare promised a more mission-focused structure to contrast the open sprawl of *Inquisition*, and while there are no Hinterlands here I was surprised

JODY MACGREGOR



THIS MONTH
Sent someone to their death and loved it.

ALSO PLAYED
Arctic Eggs, BallisticNG

how many times I returned to an early *Veilguard* zone and found it stuffed with newly accessible loot, puzzles and sidequests.

Where *Inquisition* sent you to Orlais to see a Thedas that wasn't defined by filth and barking dogs, *Veilguard* takes place in the northern half of the continent. There are no alienages here. Sure, the main entertainment in Docktown is public hanging and the Venatori use slaves as chairs, but the edgelord dial has been turned way down since *Origins*. The tone of *Veilguard* fluctuates between sentimental coffee-shop

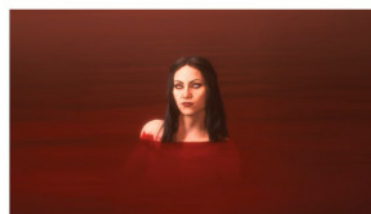
A FINAL SUICIDE MISSION EVEN MORE BRUTAL THAN THE ONE IN MASS EFFECT 2

fanfic and Blight-tentacle horror as each scene dictates.

SUICIDE IS PAINLESS

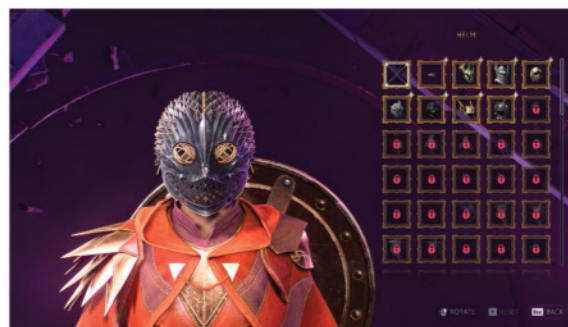
The former is concentrated in the loyalty quests. You help the necromancer come to terms with his mortality and the assassin with his bloodlust, because despite all the setting's modernisms they haven't invented therapy. Yet the reason you get all kumbaya with your *Veilguard* companions is so they'll be ready to risk their lives in a final suicide mission even more brutal than the one in *Mass Effect 2*. I loved the ending of it and was baffled BioWare didn't repeat the trick in other games. That format makes an ideal climax.

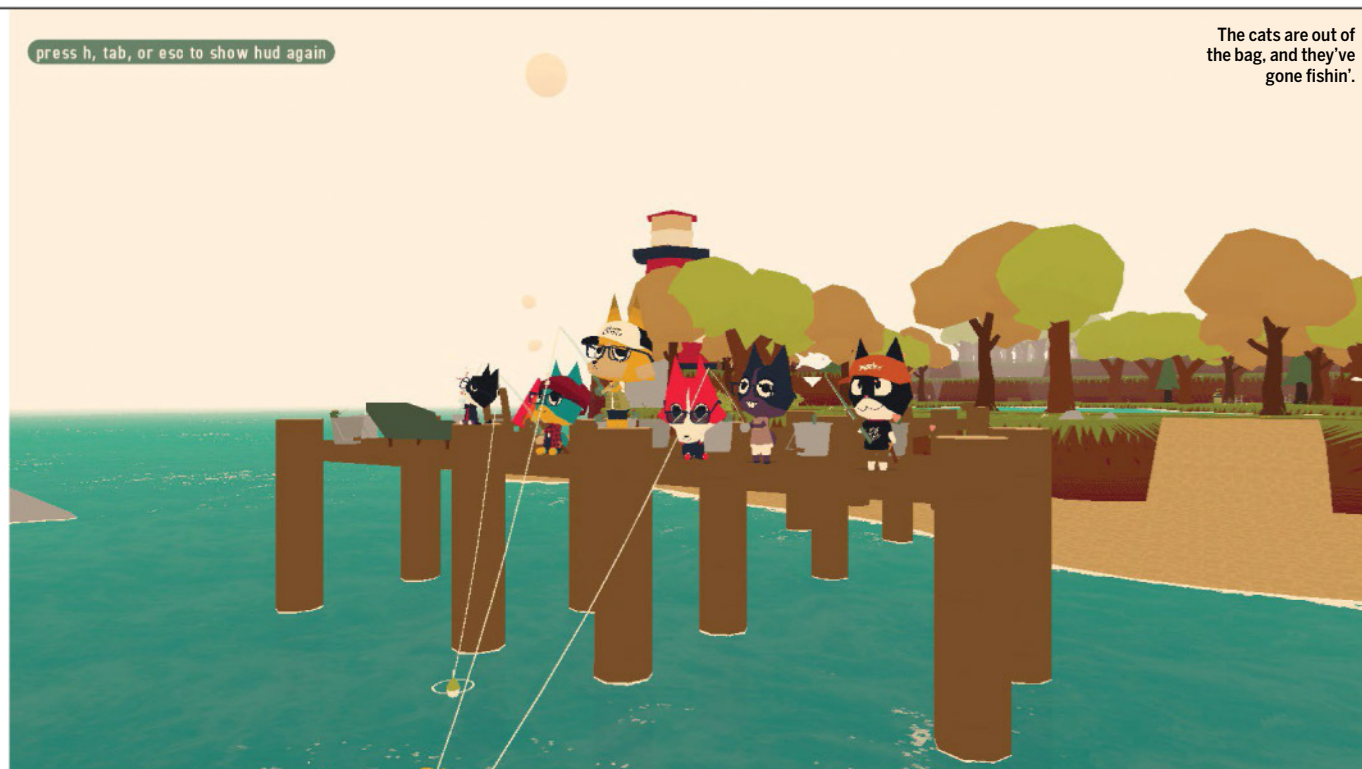
BioWare finally realised a high-pressure friendship exam makes for a more memorable climax than a choice between colour-coded endings, so that's exactly what *Veilguard* builds to. The opening may be rough, but if like me you've been waiting since 2010 for BioWare to do an encore where they play Suicide Mission (Reprise), they heard us stamping at last. The YouTube algorithm may not know what I like, but BioWare finally figured it out. ■



FAR LEFT: “Why spend money on chairs when I have men standing idle?”

BELOW: I love how dumb every single helmet looks.





“I’ve never felt so inclined to pull up a chair next to a stranger”

WEBFISHING is rapidly filling a hole in my heart I didn’t know I had

If you’re a millennial like me, you probably grew up in an age of kitschy little browser-based MMOs where the main function was, let’s be honest, the chatroom. Games like *Club Penguin* and *Toontown* are relics of a bygone era, not just because what players want has changed, but because the internet itself has changed, too.

If games like *Roblox*, *Club Penguin* and *Toontown* feel like the shutdown of gentrified malls you used to hang out in, *Webfishing* feels like an abandoned warehouse that’s been retrofitted out of spite. It’s an adorable little fishing game where you go to the lake or the ocean, fish, and turn those fish into dollars.

That cash money can then be used to upgrade your rod, lures, bait and so on – or you could just buy some clothes which, let’s be honest, is the main draw. You can also piss all your money away on scratch cards sold by some guy in a shady hut, but what kinda nimrod would do that? Haha.

HARVEY RANDALL



THIS MONTH
The internet is a dead mall, so we created our own.

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon Age: The Veilguard,
Metaphor: Refantazio

Ha. Don’t look at my cat’s bank account, it’s not important.

There’s every chance that *Webfishing*, which has a meaty 24-hour peak of around 20,000 players at the time of writing, continues to scale in popularity and gets ruined once all the jerks move in. Until that moment, though, it’s such a relaxing place to be.

VIBES: IMMACULATE

Webfishing is entirely non-competitive, and would be entirely

CASH MONEY CAN THEN BE USED TO UPGRADE YOUR ROD, LURES, BAIT AND SO ON

unremarkable if it weren’t for the care put into all your little cosmetic items and goobers. Most clothes are tongue-in-cheek options, like MILF T-shirts (that stands for Man I Love Fishing, get your head out the gutter), a ‘size matters’ hat, and so on.

The game is also explicitly inclusive, with ways to express your queer pride in the form of T-shirts, titles, and caps. When certain morons complained there wasn’t straight representation, the creators added a “straight” title for 9,999 fish dollars, air quotes included.

I could wax lyrical about how the game’s mechanics are moreish, but it’s really the vibe that’s the best part about *Webfishing*. In a MMO market full of theme park dungeons and over stimulating activities, basic social interaction flies out the window – but the main appeal of *Webfishing* is that it’s just a nice place to chat.

I’ve never felt so inclined to pull up a chair next to a stranger and just have a relaxed conversation about nothing. Which, in our isolating and scary age, has filled a hole in my heart I didn’t know existed. ■

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

New year, new season. *By Kara Phillips*

Leaue of Legends has kicked off the new year with a brand new season, which also means an entirely new look for the Rift. Lanes, minions, and turrets have fallen victim to a Noxian Invasion, blood roses now litter the field, and a new enemy is lurking and ready to target whichever champions are going above and beyond. There's a lot to sink our teeth into, and it's one hell of a year to get involved if you've been waiting to.

One of 2025 Season One's most significant additions is Atakhan, a new Epic monster set to spawn at the 20-minute mark of the game. This haunting enemy stripped from *Legends of Runeterra* will target whichever lane has the most kills. Or, if there aren't any kills, it'll be the lane with the most damage. It seems counterproductive to punish the lane having the most successful game, but, it will help to keep you on your toes and give you some extra challenge to bear in mind. Luckily you do get some time to prepare since Atakhan's pit will spawn 14 minutes into the game, and those six minutes will

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 2025

DEVELOPER
Riot Games

PUBLISHER
Riot Games

LINK
leagueoflegends.com

make all the difference. In addition, Atakhan has two forms, its choice depending on how many kills you've got and how much damage has been caused. High damage will initiate Ruinous Atakhan to spawn. This is a tough battle, especially on top of the other champions you'll still have to face, but when defeated a field of blood roses will spawn for you and your team to harvest. You'll also get the effects of Epic monster rewards permanently increased, which makes the effort seem worth it.

If you're not having such a successful game, yet you and your team have managed to cause the most damage, Voracious Atakhan will spawn instead. The rewards for defeating this form of Atakhan aren't as fruitful, but it may give you that all-important boost nonetheless. As a result of a successful kill, your team will get a one-time rebirth buff and an increase in gold from taking down champions. Sure, it's not as much of a

challenge, but it means you'll be able to take down the monster and continue with your game, and who exactly is going to turn up their nose at a bit of extra gold?

A FRESH START

The Rift isn't the only thing getting a new look this season. Running off the success of *Arcane*'s second season, it's no surprise that Riot has continued to add nods to the show into *League*. This time around, one of the games champions – Viktor – has received a rework to make his appearance and ultimate ability (and of course, his lore) more accurate to his counterpart in *Arcane*. Now his ultimate ability will grow in size each



A WORLD OF CHANGES PLAYERS HAVE BEEN ASKING FOR

time a champion is slain until the ability is over, to mirror the act of him conjuring an evergrowing storm.

New looks aside, Season One of 2025 also comes with a world of changes players have been asking for. The most prominent is the fact your rank will no longer reset once a season/split. Instead, your rank will only reset once a year. This is fantastic news, and more than likely a huge relief, for anyone who's desperately been grinding through ranks each season and trying to meet the deadline of rolling into the next before it's too late. It's only been a couple of years of a reset each season, but I for one am relieved of this return to old habits.

It's time to say goodbye to Quickplay too, but only in certain regions. As a replacement, Swiftplay is rolling out and offering a new way to play Summoner's Rift without the competitive stress of climbing the ranks. Instead, Swiftplay increases the amount of gold and XP being given out and pulls in-game events such as Baron spawning forward to make games that little bit quicker. As a whole, it's designed to be a more relaxed way to play *League of Legends* and is a great alternative for new players or anyone looking to not fight the frustration of a 45-minute game after a long day. This will feel like a breath of fresh air rather than feeling like I'm stuck in the trenches. ■

NEW RUNE(S)

Housekeeping has stopped by



AXIOM ARCANIST
As a replacement for Nullifying Orb, Axiom Arcanist will buff your ultimate ability's damage, healing, or shielding and refund you some cooldown on takedowns. This rune has been designed to benefit Casters, so any mage or magic user should definitely consider its benefits.



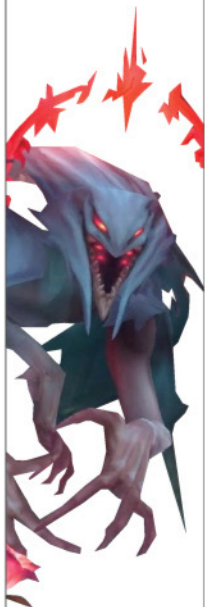
DEEP WARD
Deep Ward is rolling in as a replacement for Eyeball Collection in the Domination path. This rune grants the Stealth Wards you place in the enemy Jungle the deep effect, granting them +1HP, and lasting 30-45 seconds. This also applies to any Stealth Wards placed in the river from level 11.

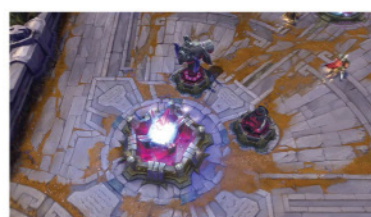
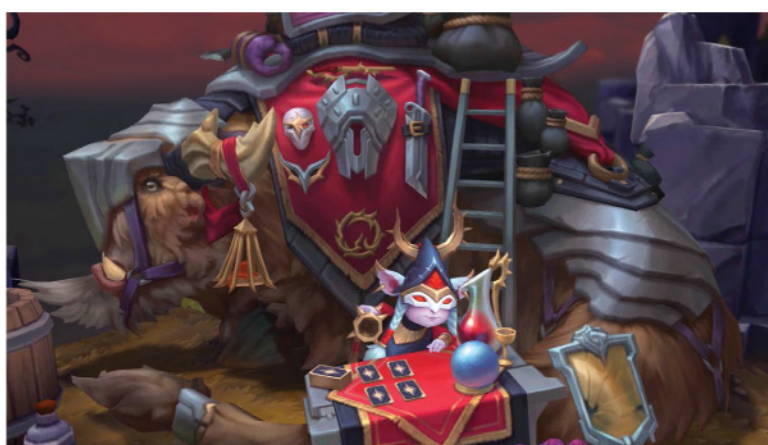
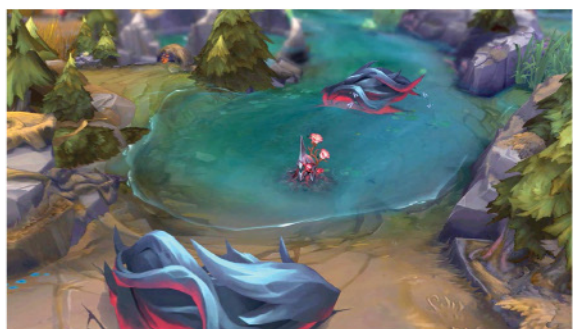


SIXTH SENSE
Another addition to the Domination tree, Sixth Sense is replacing Zombie Ward. With this rune, you'll automatically track an enemy ward if you cannot already see or track it. If you're melee, this rune has a 300-second cooldown or a 360-second cooldown for ranged users.



GRISLY MOMENTOS
The replacement for the domination tree is Grisly Momentos, which will be replacing Ghost Poro. The rune grants an infinitely stacking 5 Trinket Ability Haste upon takedowns. In modes where you don't have a Trinket the user will gain 3 Ultimate Ability Haste.





FAR LEFT: Everyone is getting into the spirit of the (new) season.



The gang's all here!



STALKER 2

Make the hostile Zone a little more friendly with mods. *By Christopher Livingston*

It's been a 15 year wait, but *STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl* finally arrived, and it's brought with it many mutants and monsters, artefacts and anomalies, and plenty of jank, glitches and bugs. In other words, in all the best and worst ways, *STALKER 2* (which is actually the fourth *STALKER* game) is just as glorious and frustrating a *STALKER* experience as it ever was.

And if you know anything about the *STALKER* series, it's got a devoted and dedicated modding community. Mods for *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* and *STALKER: Call of Pripyat* are still being worked on and released, and those games are from 2007 and 2010, respectively. I think every *STALKER* fan would agree that playing the original games

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 20, 2024

DEVELOPER
GSC Game World

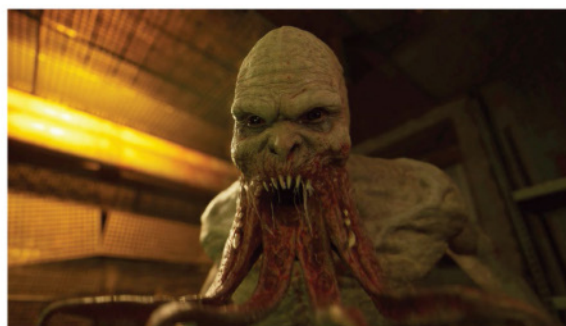
PUBLISHER
GSC Game World

LINK
STALKER2.com

without mods is a fool's errand: that's just how important mods are to the *STALKER* series. So the release of *STALKER 2* is doubly exciting: not only is there a whole new *STALKER* game to play, there are already mods for it, and there's sure to be more mods to come for the next decade, at least.

ZONED IN

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl is a survival FPS, and it's meant to be brutally hard, painfully unforgiving, and callously indifferent to your struggles. But you bought the game, so it's your right to tone things down if the difficulty is getting in the way



TWILIGHT ZONES

Games with that *STALKER* vibe



ZENLESS ZONE ZERO

The post-apocalypse has never been this colourful as you battle monsters in zones called Hollows.



INTO THE RADIUS

Very *STALKER*-ish, but in VR: search for artefacts in a zone filled with enemies.



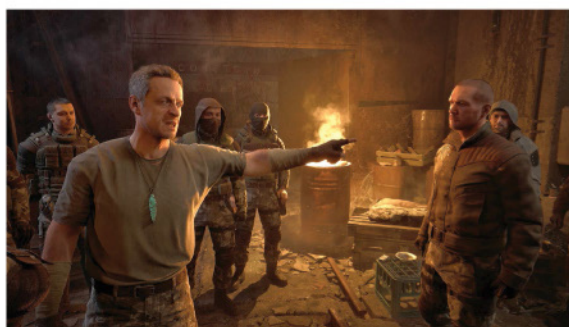
PACIFIC DRIVE

Take a drive through a world of anomalies in this game set in the Pacific Northwest.



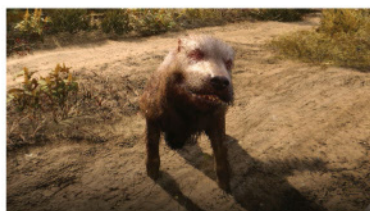
ZONE ALFA

A tabletop miniatures game in which you explore the zone while skirmishing with mutants.



FAR LEFT: Guns won't need repair quite so often. Sweet.

ABOVE: "Admit it! You think mutant deer are too tanky!"



of you having a good time. Heck, the first patch for *STALKER 2* made some tweaks in that direction already, like making Bloodsuckers a little less bullet-spongy and weapon repair costs a tad more affordable. See, even the devs think their game is a little too hard, so there's no reason to be shy about making things a little easier.

Many of the early *STALKER 2* mods are aimed at exactly that, too. If you think Bloodsuckers aren't the only creatures that need a nerf, check out Grok's *Modular Mutant Health* mod. It will let you individually tweak the stats of all the monsters in the game: boars, Burers, Controllers, dogs, deer – you name it, you can change it. You can adjust each mutant's health by increments of 20 percent, making each of them as spongy or squishy as you like. There's also a 'balanced for all' preset you can use which moderately tones down the durability of monsters without completely nerfing them.

FRUSTRATIONS

If we're talking about frustrations (besides *STALKER 2*'s many bugs), a big one is that after using up dozens of rounds of ammo and every single healing item in your inventory during a battle with some mutants... you then limp away while having absolutely nothing to show for it. Sure, it's definitely more realistic that mutant dogs and irradiated deer aren't carrying around a bag of useful items with them, but it feels unfair that you can't get anything at all from their bodies. The *Mutant Loot* mod from somberx fixes that, letting you collect a little loot from the mutants you kill. A hunk of meat here, a vial of blood there, maybe a disgusting pelt or a weird fleshy eyeball – at least you've got a souvenir of your battle and you can sell your trophies to a merchant to replenish your supply of ammo and bandages.

Another frustration is just how expensive repairing weapons is, especially since there's no crafting system so you can't do it yourself. The *Reduced Repair Cost* mod by hawkidoki handles that nicely, letting you turn down the costs of getting your gats fixed, anywhere from 80% of vanilla all the way down to completely free. But it's not just a technician nerf: you can use an alternate version of the mod to

receive a repair discount only from 'friendly' factions. Neutral or unhappy factions will still charge you full price. That's a nice way to make things a bit easier for yourself that still feels immersive.

NO EXCLUSIONS

If you're looking for an easier time with more than just mutants and money, you can improve your own abilities and become a more nimble stalker, too. The *Ledge Grabbing* mod by Kennymylenny means you can actually clamber over those chest-high ledges and fences. That's so sensible it doesn't even feel like a cheat, and now if you run into anything that's about level with Skif's head you'll be able to grab onto it and haul yourself over it. And speaking of Skif, the dude spends all his time sprinting through the Zone, so shouldn't he



DOGS AND DEER AREN'T CARRYING A BAG OF USEFUL ITEMS

be better at it? There are a couple of options: the *Longer Sprinting* mod by NickMillion lets you set a stamina reduction modifier so you can sprint for longer distances without getting winded. Meanwhile, a mod called *No Sprint Cost* by KarolisFOF does pretty much what you'd expect: now you can run forever, perfect for a world with no cars to drive or horses to ride.

Some modders want to make *STALKER 2* more reasonable without necessarily making it easier. Grok has another mod called *Economy and Difficulty Fix* that makes a lot of balance tweaks without swinging the game into a different zone of difficulty. For instance, you'll find less ammo in stashes and on dead bodies, which will definitely make things harder, but ammo in shops won't be as expensive. Gun repair costs will become much pricier, but your weapons won't degrade anywhere near as quickly as they do in the vanilla game. NPCs will be deadlier with their guns, but will also throw fewer grenades. It's a rebalancing of a lot of *STALKER*'s systems that feels a bit more sensible to the world. ■



GET STARTED IN

PATH OF EXILE 2

Blaze a path through the nightmarish world of Wraecclast. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
25 hours

VITAL LINKS

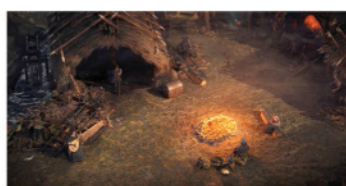
Classes explained:
pcgamer.com/games/rpg/path-of-exile-2/classes-best-class/

MP and couch co-op:
pcgamer.com/games/rpg/path-of-exile-2/multiplayer-couch-co-op/



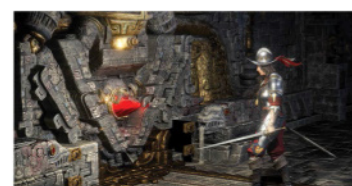
FREE FOR ALL

1 The first and most important thing to understand about *Path of Exile 2* is that classes mean nothing – seriously. While they provide a starting point on the passive skill tree, you can move into other class trees, filch their skills, and even use whatever weapon you want.



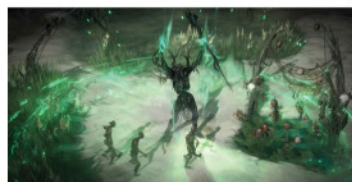
RESPEC-T

2 Fear not, you can also respec your passive skill tree once you complete Una's quests in the Clearfell Encampment and awaken The Hooded One. This NPC lets you refund passives provided you pay gold, but be warned, it costs more the higher your level.



QUICK CASH

3 On the plus side, it's quite easy to make money early on by selling gear you don't need. Though your inventory is tiny, I recommend portalling back to camp to hawk your goods. Once The Hooded One is awake, he can also identify items for free.



ROLL EM

4 Gold is also handy in letting you gamble with vendors for better gear. In act one, you can gamble with Finn in Clearfell Encampment and with Risu in act two, once you free her from the Mawdun Mine. Gambling can potentially get you a rare or unique piece of gear.



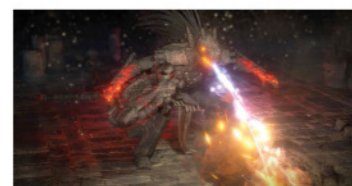
ESCAPING

5 Invest in an escape skill for when you're cornered – or pushed into a corner by enemies – and in your defensive stats; whether that's evasion, energy shield, or armour. Also bolster your resistances to offset each act's escalating debuff.



MAPPED OUT

6 Since each area in the game is randomised apart from a few set landmarks, there's little point exploring once you've discovered everything listed on the overworld map. That said, if you're stuck, use Tab to bring up the minimap overlay.



WHAT'S AILING YA?

7 One consideration to take while putting your build together is how you can combine abilities and ailments. Many skills have some inherent synergy with others, especially when you start playing around with support gems that tweak what the skill does.

LICENSE TO SKILL *Understanding PoE 2's complex skill system*



1

SKILL GEMS

Slotting a skill gem lets you allocate it to your bar and you can also increase skill gem quality using a Gemcutter's Prism.

3

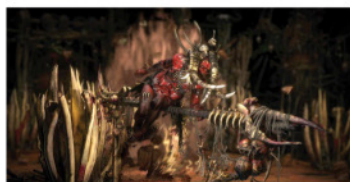
PASSIVE SKILLS

Your passive skill tree is the foundation for everything else, empowering whatever build you choose. It determines your base stats without gear modifiers.

2

SUPPORT GEMS

Using uncut support gems, you can create gems that slot into each equipped skill, changing how they work.



THAT'S THE SPIRIT

8

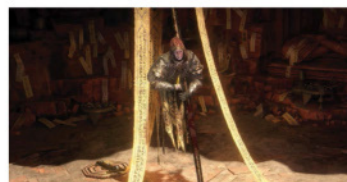
After you defeat The King in Freythorn, you'll unlock Spirit and your first persistent buff skill gem. These buffs provide passive abilities, but you'll need Spirit to fuel them. You can get more Spirit as a modifier on gear, or by defeating Ignagduk in The Azak Bog.



SPENDING SPREE

9

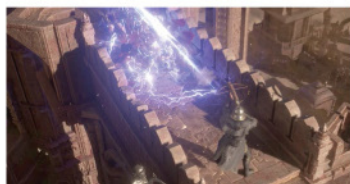
You'll get a lot of different skill gems and gear-modifying orbs as you murder your way through Wraeclest so make sure to spend them. Sure, it's worth hanging onto the rare ones like Regal Orbs until you have a use for them, but upgrading your gear will power you up.



ASCENDED

10

If you want to push your character even further, you can choose an Ascendancy in act two. These advanced classes have their own mini skill tree with powerful passive nodes, but you'll have to defeat Balbala and then complete the Ascent to Power quest.



WEAPON SET SKILL POINTS

11

For those who want to go even further down the hybrid class rabbit hole, you can use weapon set skill points. You mainly get these via consuming a Book of Specialisation, and they let you allot passive skills to either your first or second weapon.



COUCH CO-OP

12

For those who fancy playing up close and personal with a pal, you can try couch co-op. All you need to do is plug in two controllers, select controller as your input option, and then allot both. It's a little different in that you share the same screen.



BLENDING IN WITH
THE LIVING IN

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

PART 1

Can the long-dead Mister Fibula
pass himself off as a regular joe?
Probably not... *By James Nouch*



The indignities just keep piling up. The esteemed Mister Fibula has been captured, shackled and transported to the notorious island prison that is Fort Joy. Along the way, he's been mistreated and manhandled by his brutish captors, the Magisters. And as if all that wasn't bad enough, he is dressed in little more than grimy rags. For someone accustomed to the finest velvets Rivellon has to offer, this is torture.

But let's look on the bright side for just a moment. We can be grateful that no one has yet noticed that Mister Fibula Esq is a walking, talking skeleton. The mortal inhabitants of Fort Joy all seem oblivious to the fact that the island's newest arrival is undead, and no matter how much tomb dust puffs out of his joints with every lumbering step, everyone seems cheerfully willing to accept him as a regular Joe. That's fortunate, because the mere sight of anything undead is reason enough for any respectable inhabitant of Rivellon to grab their pitchforks.

So, how did our hero come to be so... corpsed, you might ask? Well, he doesn't remember. As an elf, he would have enjoyed a lifespan equivalent to many human generations before finally being laid to rest. After that, well, odds are that he was raised from the tomb by some accursed necromancer in search of loyal corpses to command. Centuries have passed since then, however, and Mister Fibula has (as far as he recalls) never been much of a details guy. For the past 500 years or so, he's been largely content to keep himself to himself, only leaving his exquisite home in search of essentials such as luxurious soft furnishings or elaborate pocket squares.

So, while any ordinary playthrough of *Divinity: Original Sin 2* will start with you trying to escape Fort Joy, Mister Fibula has a couple of extra goals to accomplish. The first is to try to secure a handful of creature comforts. He's not looking for much – just some luxurious silks and intricate damasks, perhaps. A beguiling outfit and a handful of tasteful accessories would be a good start.

The second is to try to blend in with the living. That's easier said than done for someone who's barely exchanged more than two sentences with another person for 500+ years, so at some point it's inevitable that he'll

say the wrong thing and expose himself as a cadaver. In order to dramatise this ever-present possibility, I install a randomised alarm app on my phone and place it beside me while playing. At some unknowable point between 1 and 180 minutes from now, the alarm will sound. At that moment I'll have to remove the mask and expose Fibs' shiny ivory skull for all to see. At that point, anyone in the vicinity is likely to respond with immediate violence.

LATE TO THE PARTY

But the esteemed Mister Fibula can barely make it five steps in the direction of the prison gates before he

NO ONE HAS YET NOTICED THAT MISTER FIBULA IS A WALKING, TALKING SKELETON

stumbles across another rag-clad newcomer. I recognise the distinctive scarlet scales – and the distinctive hoity-toity mannerisms – of the Red Prince from the turbulent sea voyage that brought us here. After a brief exchange, I invite him to join our party, reasoning that the presence of a towering lizard haughtily insisting upon his royal status will probably draw a bit of focus from the stinking corpse walking beside him.

As if that wasn't reason enough for a team-up, I quickly come to think of the Red Prince and Mister Fibula as unlikely kindred spirits. While Fibs may not be noble by birth, he does think of himself as a kind of upright tastemaker – someone who deserves respect and admiration by dint of their obvious aesthetic refinement. This means that the two characters share a profound and binding arrogance (despite each believing they're manifestly superior to the other).

This becomes clear as soon as my party of two starts interacting with any NPCs whatsoever. Mister Fibula manages to offend a desperately ill prisoner, for instance, by trying to comfort her with the suggestion that death isn't really so bad. It would be fair to say that the woman, Mona, doesn't seem thrilled by this conversational gambit, and this is far from an isolated incident. To make matters worse, many NPCs in *Original Sin 2* will clam up and refuse to engage with you once you've upset them.

And while the prospect of offending an entire prison population does concern me, I'm more worried about the omnipresent possibility of Mister Fibula revealing himself as undead. The randomised timer ticks away on my desk, lending Hitchcockian levels of tension to even straightforward interactions. I manage to navigate through the crowded prison ghetto without raising any suspicions, but things take a turn when Mister Fibula stops to chat with a fellow elf crouching in a spot of long grass.

Faster than he can say "isn't it a swell day to be a living creature, with

THE RULES

1. The concerns of regular, living people are confusing and quaint to you.
2. The finer things. You've had centuries to cultivate a taste for refinement and comfort.
3. You must periodically unequip your helm and reveal yourself as undead.



all the flesh and fluids that such a designation entails”, the elf has a blade pressed into the small of Mister Fibula’s back. Sebille, it turns out, is hunting a target, and our oblivious protagonist has bumbled directly into her ambush. If placing her dagger directly against Fibs’ exposed spinal column has given her any indication that she may be threatening a corpse, she’s too focused and steely to give any outward sign. Sensing that Sebille might ultimately be another haughty weirdo, Fibs invites her to join the party, and she bafflingly agrees.

And then, finally, there’s Fane. We find this undead scholar in a secluded close trying to ‘liberate’ the face from a corpse in order to wear it himself. When we question his actions, he explains himself with all the weariness of a genius who’s been interrupted in the lab by a toddler. Intoxicated by these heretofore unseen levels of egotism, Mister Fibula invites Fane to become the final member of the party.

A pack of four bastards – two of whom would be killed on sight if their faces were to be uncovered – we set out to escape Fort Joy. What could possibly go wrong?

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

Everywhere I go, I hear whispers about somebody named Griff. Some love him, others hate him, but it’s clear that he occupies some kind of elevated position among the imprisoned population – a kind of feared leader. Mister Fibula must make this fellow’s acquaintance. As two esteemed gentlemen, he reasons, they’ll surely see eye to eye-socket.

But first, we simply must do something about our clothes. I rack my brains, trying to remember whether I’ve seen any decent clothing lying around, but the only garment I can think of were the trousers that were strewn on the floor beside Mona’s sickbed. I wonder whether that’s a bit too cruel for Mister Fibula, and ultimately decide that he would be unlikely to let sickness, morality, or petty legality stand between him and a good pair of slacks.

A few minutes later, we strike it lucky by stumbling across a merchant named Hilde. She’s selling high-value items she’s ‘recovered’ from the Magisters, including a rather modish pair of magical boots and a finely wrought

BELOW: It should go without saying that Mister Fibula is a cunning alias that was adopted to seamlessly blend in with the living. Unfortunately, he has long since forgotten his actual name.



A BONE TO PICK WITH YOU

Fibs' best conversational gambits, ranked



“
You there, guard!
Tell me, where
can I find the
nearest purveyor
of quality velvets?
”



“
My my, look at the
time. At this hour
of the day, I usually
like to excrete waste
products. I do it in a
secluded chamber
designed specifically
for the purpose.
”



“
Why, look at that
overcoat you're
wearing. The fabric
would make a
sensationally
kitschy cravat.
”

chestplate that gleams in the light. That would be wonderful were it not for the fact that none of these items are remotely in our price range. Fibs waits for her to turn around, pickpockets the items, and then legs it.

At long last, our duds are sufficiently à la mode for Fibs to feel comfortable making an acquaintance with Griff. We approach his workstation (a kind of makeshift kitchen) and initiate a dialogue. And it's at this moment that the alarm on my desk goes off, its wailing siren signifying that Mister Fibula has effectively just shown his entire skull to all present. Trying to picture the moment, I imagine him so appalled at Griff's scruffy attire and lack of grooming that he slaps a bony hand to each cheek in astonishment, like a skeletal Macaulay Culkin.

The rules of my playthrough insist that I exit the conversation immediately, and remove Mister Fibula's hood. As expected, Griff immediately draws a weapon, and we enter combat. What I hadn't anticipated, however, is just how many people in the nearby area would want a piece of the action. Griff's hangers-on leap into the fray, so my poorly equipped party is quickly surrounded by assailants.

The battle that follows is a disappointingly one-sided affair, thanks in no small part to how shockingly well-armed all of our opponents seem to be. Fort Joy may be an island prison patrolled by a small army of fanatical guards, but for whatever reason they don't seem particularly concerned that every other inmate is packing heat. An onslaught of attacks rains down on my conceited-but-under-equipped party, with clubs, arrows, and spectacular magical attacks all chipping away at the group's meagre pool of HP.

The Red Prince is the first to fall, brought low by the magical might of some Griff-loyalist called Needle. Fane is the next to perish, his ancient bones pulverised by swords and cudgels. Sebille deals a surprising



WE STRIKE IT LUCKY BY STUMBLING ACROSS A MERCHANT NAMED HILDE

amount of damage – dealing critical hits by landing backstab after backstab – before falling to the bombardment. Finally, Griff himself lands the killing blow on Mister Fibula to make it a full party wipe.

NO BONES ABOUT IT

What a vulgar display. I reload the save and reset the timer, but resolve to stay the hell away from Griff and his cronies. Instead, I decide to search the coastlines for some way out of this place – perhaps a hidden tunnel, a buried escape map, or an extravagant pleasure-yacht waiting in dock.

This time, just ten minutes pass before the dreaded alarm goes off again. Mercifully, the only living things in my vicinity this time are a trio of saltwater crocodiles, and they seem equally determined to eat the living and the dead. I remove Fibs' mask, but it changes little about the encounter. We experience a second party wipe, but somehow the group's attitude of boundless superiority remains undented.

It's at this point that I'm starting to think that *Divinity 2* is really pretty

hard, especially if you're role-playing as a shrivelled old corpse who manages to alienate 50% of NPCs they encounter. But, as Fibs and co skulk around the prison in a grumpy funk, I spot a high ledge I'd never noticed before. I use a teleportation scroll to magically make my way up there, and pick the lock of an imposing door.

We've just gained entry to Orivand's Chambers, and let me tell you: Orivand has excellent taste in home furnishings. Burgundy tapestries hang from the walls and well-stuffed beds call invitingly from behind chic wooden screens. Sadly, almost none of it can be crammed into Mister Fibula's bag, so we make do with a gleaming malachite and head into the next room.

At this point, it would seem that we've stumbled into the dark heart of Fort Joy. Stern Magisters look down on a terrified prisoner, delivering a patronising

sermon even as they prepare a ritual to rob her of her humanity. All of which is bad and all, but I spot an open window in the corner and I don't fancy Fibs' chances against this fearsome band of guards. We sneak our way to the corner of the room, and clamber through the opening to freedom.

Mister Fibula and his comrades have escaped! Ahead of them, a boundless expanse of... disgusting and dangerous swamp. Will they make it back to civilisation? Will Mister Fibula successfully navigate a conversation with a mortal? And will he ever be reunited with his velvets? Join him next month to find out. ■

ABOVE: The inhabitants of Rivellon may loathe and fear the undead, but I kept meeting them in my travels. Most of them seemed nice!





WHY I LOVE

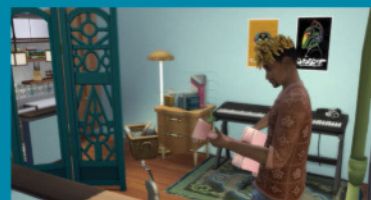
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

BUILDING TINY HOUSES IN THE SIMS 4

Compact living is still the game's best self-imposed puzzle. *By Lauren Morton*



LEFT: My three-metre flat barely works, but it was a fun visual puzzle to solve.



The pinnacle of fun in *The Sims* when I was a child was building a monstrosity of mansion that took up an entire suburban lot and running out of ideas for what kinds of rooms to put in them. Mansions have rooms entirely dedicated to a single grand piano, right? Nowadays in *The Sims 4*, my ambitions are significantly smaller, but no less of a challenge. Building tiny homes is now my favourite pastime in *The Sims 4*.

The Tiny Living stuff pack for the *Sims 4* first launched in 2020 and though the pack itself was small – with only 36 Build Mode objects and 32 new Create-A-Sim items – it had a huge impact. It formalised and popularised a niche way to build by giving bonuses for attempting to build houses of different sizes. A micro home, which can only be 32 enclosed tiles, gives all sorts of buffs like reduced household bills, increased skill gain, and other perks. Tiny homes, which are 64 tiles, and small homes which are 100, also give small boosts to household efficiency.

But I'm not a Live Mode player, I'm just here to build. The best way to find the fun in a game you've already put hundreds of hours into is to impose new little challenges on yourself, and tiny houses are just my kind of challenge. Fitting everything a Sim needs – a bedroom, bathroom, ways to make food, and some source of fun – into only 32 tiles is shockingly difficult but there's a real joy in learning to strategy behind it.

Floor plans are tough enough to come up with from scratch, but

BATH MATH

How to build the tiny toilet

1 With the bb.moveobjects cheat on, your sim can use a toilet even when technically overlapping a door.

2 Snowy Escape and Discover University both have wet room-style showers that don't have a shower door.



3 A door in the centre of your 1x3 tile bath gives just enough space for the necessities.

4 Don't forget to decorate the walls with extras like a shower caddy and toilet paper.

they're doubly difficult when I realise that I just don't have the luxury of creating a 3x3 bathroom and instead need to figure out how to fit a bedroom into that same tiny space. And that leaves me just 23 tiles total for a kitchen, bathroom and some suggestion of a living space.

CHALLENGED ME TO TURN FLOATING SHELVES INTO A KITCHEN SPACE

The time-honoured bb.moveobjects cheat for turning off clipping for objects works wonders in tiny homes where I always want to scooch things just a little closer together. Some *Sims* players are well-practiced in the arcane arts of making a single-tile bathroom by slightly clipping sinks into walls right next to tiny toilets and shower heads. Personally I'm just thrilled when I manage to make a 1x3

tile bathroom that almost looks like a human could use it in real life. Nobody really likes using a hall bathroom where the toilet and sink are duelling on opposite sides of a door, but it does get the job done.

CLUTTERBUG

One of the best bits of a tiny home is how cosy and lived-in they feel. The economy of space invites me to make fun little choices like sticking a laundry basket on the end of a bed or using half walls in a loft as de facto shelf space the way I absolutely would in real life. Cramming tiny homes with clutter is the ultimate cure for my childhood mansion piano problem. No longer do I look at a room and wonder what I could dedicate it to. Instead I'm working out how to make a bedroom do triple duty as an office and living room.

The last challenge remaining in a tiny house build is the inspiration. The internet never fails me though and I've found everything from Reddit to TikTok to be stacked with real life tiny house inspirations to choose from. My latest challenge was replicating a three-metre flat posted by a woman living in Beijing. It was a great little puzzle that challenged me to turn floating shelves into a bootstrapped kitchen space while shoving in a functional mini fridge and twin bed.

The thing that keeps me coming back to tiny houses over and over in *Sims 4* is how achievable they feel. I know I'm not the only one to get the building bug one night, start a home, and then never finish it. But I can fiddle with a tiny home just in an evening after work and have something I'm proud of before bed.

I could have been building tiny homes in *Sims 4* since launch, sure, but the Tiny Living pack gave me the inspiration to really commit to the bit. Four years later, I still choose to work on a tiny house almost every time I open the game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2014

DEVELOPER
EA

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
ea.com



RIGHT: My most intricate builds are always the tiny ones.



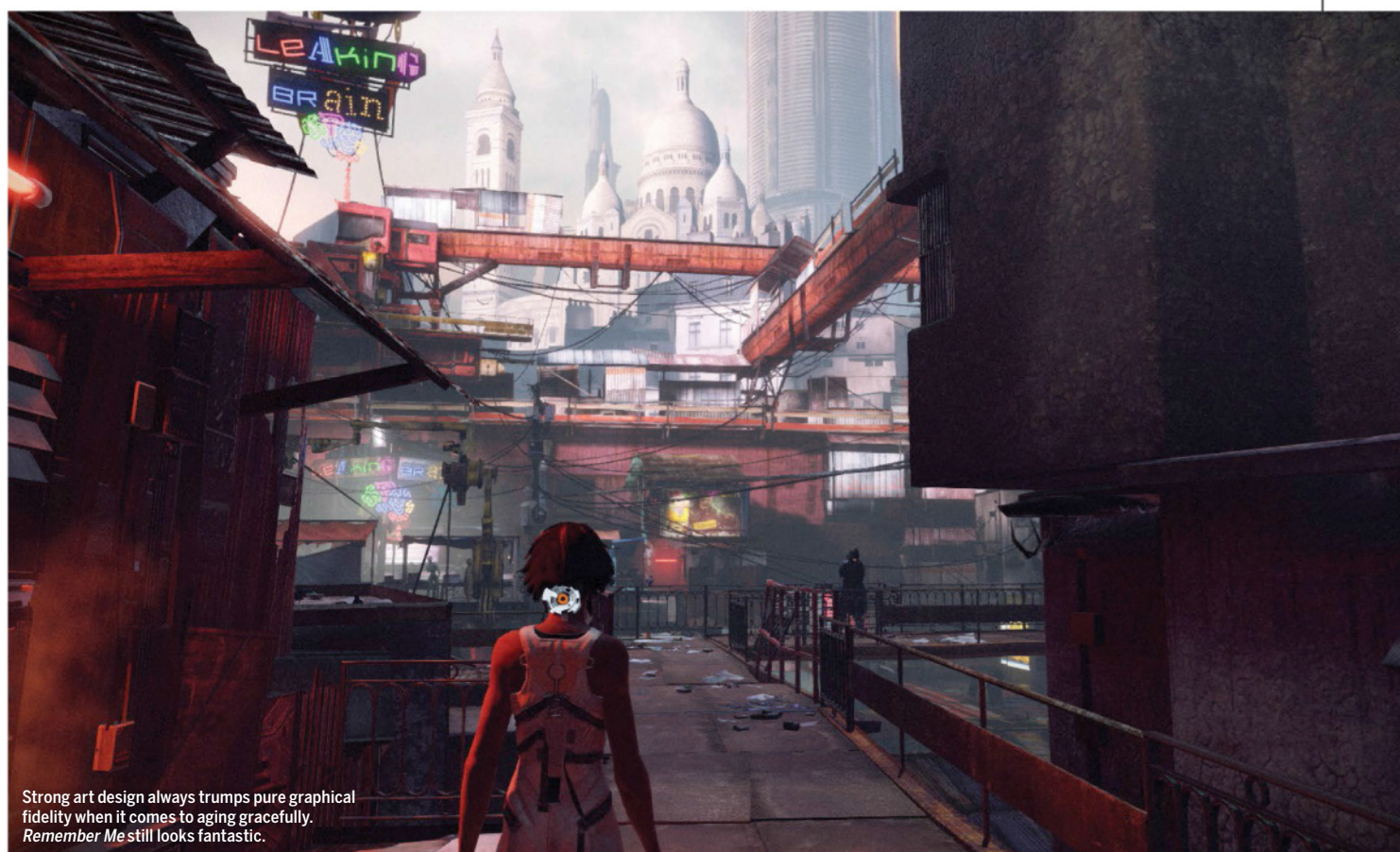


REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Despite the tampering with her brain, Nalin remembers her judo



Strong art design always trumps pure graphical fidelity when it comes to aging gracefully. *Remember Me* still looks fantastic.

REMEMBER ME

A melancholy trip down memory lane. *By Robin Valentine*

Poking fun at forgotten brawler *Remember Me's* name is low-hanging fruit, but it's hard to get anywhere without acknowledging the irony. These days, developer Don't Nod is instead remembered primarily for the first two *Life is Strange* games. *Remember Me* is lucky to be a footnote.

In retrospect the studio's debut game seems like the truest expression of its original identity – creative, stylish, off-kilter and so French. But its middling reception and disappointing sales left the company in dodgy financial straits that only *Life is Strange* saved it from, ensuring it would never get a sequel, direct or spiritual – and setting Don't Nod on a very different path. The game is set in Neo-Paris, essentially a dystopian,

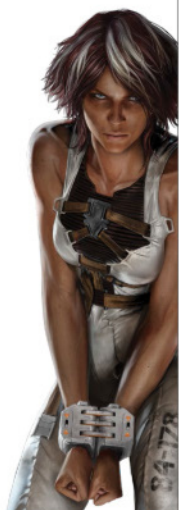
sci-fi version of the view the developers would have had out of their office window. In this dark future, memories have become a commodity – they can be traded, shared, erased, or even altered via a device called a sensen. The rich and powerful hoard knowledge and experience, while the poor are left with jumbled brains, slowly losing their humanity as they devolve into cannibalistic leapers.

With that set up, I can for once forgive the amnesiac protagonist trope. Hero Nilin wakes up as a prisoner in some sort of memory laboratory, having just had her mind wiped of all but scraps. Before long she's escaping the facility, rediscovering her past and, of course, turning out to be some kind of revolutionary trying to bring down this corrupt society.

MIND GAMES

I found *Remember Me* very charming when it first released – in my own mind palace, it has long enjoyed the position of underrated gem. Coming back to it in 2025, I can still see what I liked about it, but I find it a lot harder to forgive its obvious flaws. It's style over substance, and while the style has aged well, the substance feels more lacking than ever.

Despite the tampering with her brain, Nilin remembers her judo well. The game's martial arts battles with leapers and cops are the only element with any depth at all, and even then only relatively speaking. You button mash through basic combos, dodge and activate magic sci-fi powers once you've built up enough meter, and that's it. A system that lets you craft custom combo strings – loosely justified as another expression of memory control – is too lightweight to elevate it. Ultimately in motion it all feels distressingly weightless, like you're boxing with oven mitts on. >>



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 3, 2013

PUBLISHER
Capcom

DEVELOPER
DONTNOD Entertainment

LINK
dont-nod.com



ABOVE: As you use your memory overload to blast cops' brains out, a holographic image of their screaming face displays over their helmets. Grim.

But really what you spend the majority of your time doing isn't even fighting – it's just moving through the city. When you're not walking down the street, you're performing straightforward climbing sequences. It's the most aggressive of filler. The goal, clearly, is just to get you to drink in the visuals alongside some minor button pushing, but the game doesn't do nearly enough to justify holding your attention.

And yet... they are truly fantastic visuals. Even 11 years on from the game's original release, Neo-Paris is absolutely gorgeous, with that

concept-art-come-to-life look so few games achieve. The effects of the sensen are similarly striking, represented as glitchy holograms that flow around character as memories are transferred or manipulated – or blasted out the front of a cop's face in one of the game's finisher animations.

French style suffuses everything, creating a unique feel in the sea of US-influenced action-adventure games. Every outfit is chic and glamorous, evoking Jean Paul Gautier's sci-fi costume design in *The Fifth Element*. Iconic landmarks pepper the city, breaking up the

sleek and futuristic with elements of the old and gothic. Nilin herself is an ethereal runway model with a bottom the camera cannot get enough of – give her a cigarette to hold and she'd be ready to break a leading man's heart in a subtitled black-and-white art film.

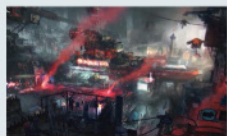
What's perhaps most disappointing about returning to the game, however, is rediscovering quite how little real world-building there is to bring together all this style and flair. The city of Neo-Paris simply doesn't make any sense whatsoever. The sensen device seems to be the source of all ills in this future, but there's precious little explanation of why. What is it about digitising memories that is causing society to collapse so rapidly? The answer is a vague 'it's a bad idea' with no real specifics.

MIND OVER MATTER

In Nilin's hands, memory tech is just magic, enabling a wide variety of thematically disconnected superpowers. Elsewhere, the loss of memories causes physical mutation into the long-limbed, deformed leapers. A metaphor, perhaps, for how memories empower us and define our humanity, but without any

MANKIND DIVIDED

New technologies, same old class structure



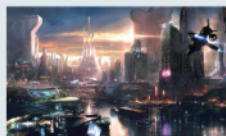
THE LOWER CLASS

In Slum 404, the memory-poor live out confused lives hunting for their next fix of positive memories – or else devolve into the leapers that dwell in sewers.



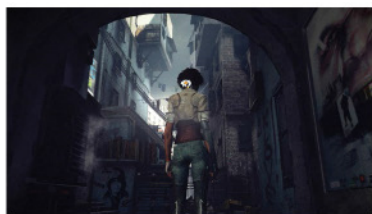
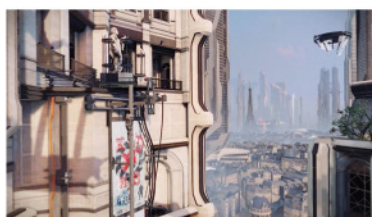
THE MIDDLE CLASS

Police barricades separate Slum 404 from the Paris of the better off, who live on clean, familiar streets and use robot servants to carry their shopping for them.



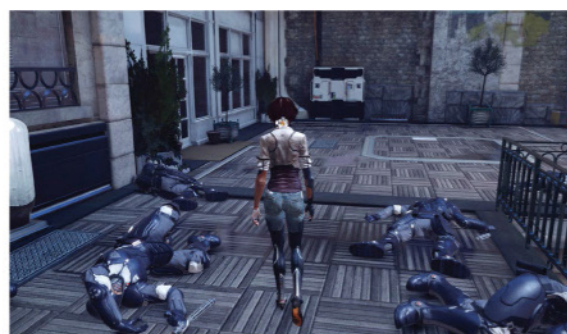
THE UPPER CLASS

True power comes with proximity to the company behind the sensens. These people live in luxury, but for some that just means getting lost in happy memories.



TOP: The Paris skyline complete with Eiffel Tower. Magnifique.

RIGHT: Hulking thug Kid Xmas fights you while presenting his own TV show. Fun idea, but the battle itself is lifeless.



underpinning it all just feels a bit of a mess of ideas. In some cases, that leads to unintentionally silly or even offensive implications – why, for example, is real-life skin condition vitiligo a symptom of devolving into a monster? And if leapers are just victims of the system, why am I spending so much time punching them in the face?

Every character and location is given a name either completely on-the-nose, or utterly nonsensical. A contact named Headache Tommy is found at The Leaking Brain bar. The revolutionaries are called Errorists, and seek to infiltrate the St Michel Comfortress. Funny and memorable, but none of it feels grounded in any kind of reality.

Whatever actual point the game is trying to make about our relationship with memory and technology is lost in the muddle. Is it a critique of social media? Is it warning us not to cling too tightly to the past? Or describing the dangers of trying to suppress your worst memories? Two years earlier we were watching *Black Mirror's* *The Entire History of You* expertly pick apart our obsession with recording and rewatching our own lives – *Remember Me* takes ten hours and an awful lot more money to very

A CONTACT NAMED HEADACHE TOMMY IS FOUND AT THE LEAKING BRAIN BAR

beautifully fail to articulate anything anywhere near as clear.

QUALITY TIME

And yet there is one element that feels in harmony with the game's theme. At certain points in the story, Nilin is able to 'remix' the memories of key characters – diving back into an important moment in their lives, and tweaking parts of the scene to make it go a different way. In the present, their disposition is thus altered, demonstrating how core these memories and moments can be to our personalities.

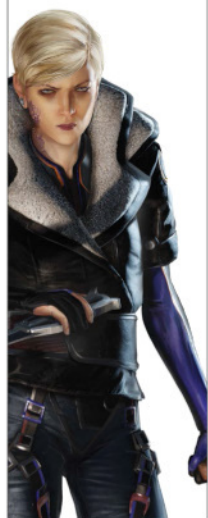
One early sequence sees her hijack the mind of a bounty hunter about to bring her in. The killer is going for the reward on her head to pay for treatments for their husband, who's turning leaper – but by scrubbing backwards and forwards through a memory of him in the hospital, and adjusting small details, you create a version of events where he died instead. Returning to the

present, the bounty hunter is now motivated to join forces with you and seek revenge for his death.

It's not a perfect concept, for sure. Executing the fairly simple puzzles takes a bit too much of going back and forth through dry footage, and there aren't enough of the sequences over the course of the game for Don't Nod to build on the idea. From a story perspective, it also seems morally dubious in a way the game has oddly little interest in addressing.

But there's the seed there of something really compelling and interesting. As you try different adjustments to the memory you get to see different outcomes of the scene, playing around with cause and effect until you get the outcome you want. It's easy to see the potential.

Two years later, *Life is Strange* would realise that potential, simply reframing the idea as time travel instead of memory hacking as protagonist Sam uses her powers to rewind and change the past. The result was critical acclaim, millions of copies sold, and a future for Don't Nod secured. So, *Remember Me* might be forgotten, but one of the strongest parts of it lived on, remixed. Maybe there's a point to be found there after all. ■



HARVEY RANDALL



I'm afflicted with MMO brainrot and a fascination for weird, mid, or just plain interesting games. I'm a Soulslike fiend, an RPG lover and a sucker for a game with history.



ATLYSS

atlyss.net

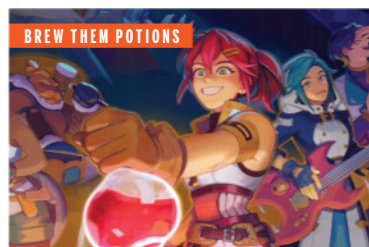
→ I started playing *Atlyss* mostly as a joke, after a few tongue-in-cheek recommendations from my friends, and was shocked to discover that this overtly horny RPG is genuinely really solid – harkening back to the days of old school MMOs in a cheap-as-chips package.



METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

metaphor.atlus.com

→ Atlus' first foray into fantasy with its *Persona* formula was taken so masterfully that you have to wonder why it took the studio so long. *Metaphor: ReFantazio* was 95 hours of heartfelt delight for me, making for some excellent fantasy food, despite being a story about a campaign trail.



POTIONOMICS

potionomics.com

→ *Potionomics* isn't a new game, coming out in 2022 – it did, however, get a game-changer of an update that makes it worth playing now. Developer Voracious Games added heaps of voice acting, an endless mode, and the ability to smooch everyone in a single playthrough.



TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS

suspiciousdevelopments.com

→ I was asked to review this game for this mag, and have been eternally cursed to evangelise for it ever since. *Tactical Breach Wizards* is 20-odd hours of distilled, pitch-perfect turn-based tactics, all wrapped up in a shockingly well-written and delightfully funny story.



A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Harvey Randall



FINAL FANTASY XIV

finalfantasyxiv.com

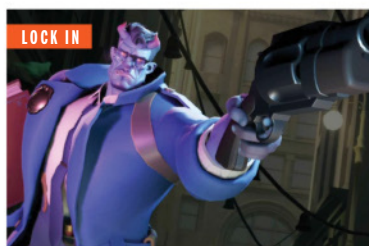
→ I have a lot of complaints about *FF XIV*'s latest patches – but that's because I've been playing this thing for 4,000 hours. With a graphical overhaul and retooled early game dungeons in the rear view, however, it's actually the best time to get started as a new player.



SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

sekirothegame.com

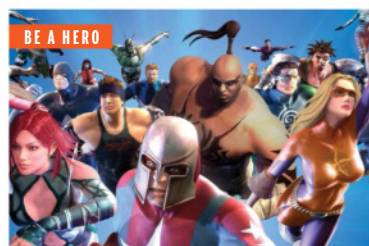
→ Recent non-Fromsoft Soulslikes have actually been borrowing from *Sekiro* more than the mainline *Dark Souls* games. Yet whenever I talk to my fellow *Souls* enjoyers, they keep saying they haven't played it. But this is the OG parry simulator, and you owe it to me, specifically, to play it.



DEADLOCK

bit.ly/41eWgRo

→ I spent around 2,000 hours in *Dota 2*, enough to make me swear off MOBAs for life. Until *Deadlock*, obviously. While I've abstained for now, wanting to wait until it's fully formed, it's another peak title from Valve. I expect that my 44 hours will turn to 4,444 in the years ahead.



CITY OF HEROES: HOMECOMING

forums.homecomingservers.com

→ A dead MMO, revived in secret for years, now available in its best state and officially sanctioned by NCSoft. The OG *City of Heroes* was a piece of MMO history, taken from us too soon, but now you can just straight-up play it. Sometimes, good things do happen in gaming.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE BIG SLI**

PART 3

"Oh Dicky, this is all so ugly," Carmen replied when I questioned her about Rusty's death. "Oh Rusty, he was such a sweetie. I saw him leave the tavern on his own, but... I should've been there for him, when instead I was just being selfish and looking out for my own happiness!" When I asked Carmen what she meant, the dame clammed up, but said Brody would explain everything.

I caught up with Brody as he sat with Vivienne. They seemed close and, as Vivienne turned to a call from Eddie who was fixing them all another round of drinks, I swore his gaze lingered upon her for just a beat too long. Brody sure could've lifted Rusty into that barrel, but he said he'd been with Carmen at the time of Rusty's death, with them planning to elope and get married in the fall. That meant that everyone, aside from Stanley, had an alibi. But nobody hides the truth from Dick Ray-Tracing.

"This was an intricately plotted, cynical murder," I said, after gathering all the royal council together. "And you might have gotten away with it, too, if it wasn't for one small detail, something you didn't plan for. All evidence points to Stanley being the culprit. And that is indeed what the killer wanted me to believe. Stanley was to take the fall for this, right? But, by pure chance, when Stanley saw Rusty's character, Profion, walking into the Fantasy Crown auction house after Rusty had been murdered, it proved there was more to this case than meets the eye.

"Because Rusty was dead, wasn't he Carmen?" I asked. "As after plying him with booze and then seducing him at the aftershow party, you lured him around the back of the bar and caved his head in with Brody's warhammer. Rusty hadn't, as you said, left the joint on his own, but instead you'd slipped out too, and Brody here had covered for you. You'd been blackmailing him about how he and Vivienne had been having a tryst behind his best friend Eddie's back. That's why Brody said he was with you," I continued. "After killing Rusty, you dumped his body in the barrel."

"You've got it all wrong, Dicky," Carmen tossed out while putting her hand on her heart. "How could I have been killing Rusty if he was clearly playing Fantasy Crown at the same time? It doesn't add up. Plus, what about the warhammer? I don't have it." "I'm glad you asked that, Carmen," I said, before turning. "Because Vivienne has it concealed, don't you?"

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